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University
of Glasgow

**A Cross-cultural Analysis of Gender and Practitioner-child
Interactions in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) Settings
in Scotland, Hong Kong, and Mainland China**

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B.A., B.Ed., M.A.

Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements of
the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) in Education

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Abstract

This study is conducted in the global contexts of policy calls for more men to work in early childhood education and care (ECEC) and of concerns over the assumed ‘feminisation’ of ECEC. The overarching aim is to critically interrogate whether men should be encouraged to work in the ECEC workforce in greater numbers in both the UK and China (Mainland China and Hong Kong). Framed by the poststructuralist theoretical framework of gender, this research aims to address four research questions: 1. How do practitioners posit themselves as women/men working with young children in ECEC? 2. How do children view their practitioners’ gender in relation to their daily interactions? 3. What is the nature of interactions between practitioners and children in ECEC settings? How far and to what extent can these interactions be seen to be gendered, and in what ways? 4. How far and to what extent can culturally-specific gender discourses be seen to have an impact on practitioner-child interactions in Scotland, Hong Kong and Mainland China, and in what ways?

Qualitative, multiple-method and cross-cultural approaches were adopted. Research methods employed include observations in ECEC settings, interviews with ECEC practitioners, and pictorial activities with children. 17 ECEC settings were recruited from the cities of Edinburgh, Hong Kong, and Tianjin, and 34 ECEC practitioners and 280 children aged 3-6 years old participated in the research. The findings suggest that practitioners’ and children’s constructions of gender subjectivities can be diverse and dynamic processes through which individuals embody and ‘perform’ their gender with references to a variety of cultural and gender discourses that situate them. This study therefore argues that ECEC pedagogies and practices need to enable practitioners and children to interrogate dominant gender discourses and to become gender-sensitive and -flexible performers, in order to achieve gender equality, diversity and inclusion in ECEC. Current political drives in the UK, China and elsewhere to recruit more men to work in ECEC and to achieve a gender-balanced ECEC workforce need to reconsider their theoretical underpinnings and to make sure that such policies will not reinforce binary, hegemonic gender structures. A gender-diverse and -flexible approach to gender and ECEC is preferable for equitable and inclusive ECEC.

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Author's declaration

I declare that, except where explicit reference is made to the contribution of others, this dissertation is the result of my own work and has not been submitted for any other degree at the University of Glasgow or any other institution.

Printed Name: Yuwei Xu

Signature: _____

Abbreviations

BERA	British Educational Research Association
CPC	Communist Party of China
ECEC	Early Childhood Education and Care
GDI	Gender Development Index
GII	Gender Inequality Index
GTCS	General Teacher Council Scotland
HK	Hong Kong
HKTA	Hong Kong Taoist Association
LGBTQ+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning, and others
MDGs	United Nations Millennium Development Goals
OECD	The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OPFS	One Parent Families Scotland
PRC	People's Republic of China
SAR	Special Administrative Region
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
SERA	Scottish Educational Research Association
SVQ	Scottish Vocational Qualifications
UK	The United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland
UNCRC	United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNESCO	The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNICEF	The United Nations Children's Fund
WoC	Women's Commission

Chapter 1 Introduction

1.1 Background

This study is conducted in the global contexts of policy calls for more men to work in early childhood education and care (ECEC) (Rohrmann & Emilsen, 2015; Warin, 2017; Xu & Waniganayake, 2017) and of concerns over the assumed ‘feminisation’ of ECEC (Laere, Vandenbroeck, Roets, & Peeters, 2014). Statistics have shown that the ECEC workforce throughout the world has long been gender-imbalanced, with women accounting for the majority of the staff population in the industry. The most recent *Education at a Glance 2017* report has indicated that the average percentage of female practitioners in the pre-primary (including early childhood education) level of education is 97% among all OECD countries (OECD, 2017a). This figure is supported by academic literature written in contexts such as the UK, Germany, Belgium and others, which reports that the proportion of men working in ECEC workforce has consistently remained low (1-3%), except for a few countries like Norway, Denmark and Turkey that report a rate of over 5% (Brody, 2014; Peeters, Rohrmann & Emilsen, 2015; Warin, 2017). More specifically, in the three countries/regions where this study was conducted, 4% of staff in the day care of children sector in Scotland are male (Scottish Social Services Council, 2017); available data shows that there were 1.7% local kindergarten teachers (practitioners) in Hong Kong (HK) who were male in 2016, rising from 1.2% in 2013¹ (Education Bureau, 2017); and the percentage of male full-time practitioners working in pre-school education institutions in Mainland China is 2.12% (Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China [PRC], 2016).

To address the gender imbalance in the ECEC workforce, many countries such as Norway and Germany have taken initiatives to increase the number of men working in ECEC (Peeters et al., 2015). In Scotland, a project entitled ‘Men in Childcare’ was launched in 2001 to provide accredited training specifically to men who want to work in childcare. Funded jointly by the City of Edinburgh Council and the Scottish Government, this project has, to date, encouraged many men to work in Scottish ECEC settings (see <http://www.meninchildcare.co.uk/> for further information on this project; also see *Chapter 6* for further details). In

¹ The numbers of teachers in local kindergartens in Hong Kong are 11,612 in 2013 and 12,744 in 2016.

Mainland China, several provinces including Jiangsu and Fujian have introduced policies to encourage men's participation in ECEC (Jiangsu Education, 2014; MENTEACH, 2015). Free tertiary education is provided to men (only) who choose to study for an ECEC major in those provinces. Nevertheless, there are no governmental measures taken to encourage men's participation in Hong Kong kindergartens, and Hong Kong government have documented in 2002 that '[b]ased on the principle of equal opportunity, we do not have any policy to encourage a particular gender to join kindergarten teaching or to receive training for such purpose [attracting men to the profession]' (Education Bureau, 2002).

With those initiatives in effect, however, Peeters and others (2015) point out that there is little progress made in achieving a gender balance in ECEC. At the same time, scholars have started to re-consider the rationales of achieving gender balance (and increasing men's numbers) in ECEC. Underpinning the conceptualisation of gender balance in ECEC are liberal theories of gender equality and the value of diversity in terms of representation (Pateman & Grosz, 2013; Warin, 2017). Nonetheless, as I will be arguing here, men's participation in ECEC settings is actually likely to reproduce gender stereotypes and to perpetuate cultures of hegemonic masculinity in the workforce (see also Burn & Pratt-Adams, 2015; Xu & Waniganayake, 2017). Indeed, Warin (2017) has argued that gender 'flexibility' is preferable to gender balance as the rationale for including men in young children's education and care. According to her findings from empirical research conducted in an 'unusual' nursery in England that employs 5 male practitioners (out of 26 full- and part-time staff members), she concluded that recruiting more men in the ECEC workforce is not sufficient to challenge traditional gender structures. Instead, it is more important to recruit and train practitioners (men and women) who are/can be sensitive to issues of gender and can implement a gender-flexible pedagogy (Warin & Adriany, 2017). This current study therefore, is inspired by the desire to critically interrogate the well-rehearsed argument on whether men should be encouraged to work in the ECEC workforce in greater numbers. I also wish to explore whether practitioners' gender affects their delivery of ECEC provisions and ultimately, delivery of quality ECEC.

1.2 Motivation of this research

This study is also motivated by my personal experiences as a man who studied ECEC majors in both China and the UK, as well as working as an intern in a Chinese kindergarten. Through the Chinese *gaokao*², I accidentally ended up in studying for an education major allocated to me by the university that offered me a place (although my first choices were law or Chinese Literature). During my first year of my undergraduate course, I was given the chance to select from either a general education program or an early childhood education program. Having gained some basic knowledge about what it would be like to study for either program, I decided to enrol on the early childhood education program because I was interested in the skill-based modules such as dancing, painting and piano. I then became one of only three men on that program, out of a total of 33 students. Whilst studying I also worked as an intern in a kindergarten in Beijing, and was one the very few men there (indeed, this kindergarten had no full-time male practitioners, but only three male interns including myself; and we all came from the same university). Subsequently, I was fortunate to be given the opportunity to come as an exchange student to the UK and I continued to do a Master of Arts in Child Studies at an English university. This time, I was the only male student registered on that programme.

When I was studying for those courses and working in the kindergarten, I was always asked about my reasons for choosing to study/work in this field. There were also positive and negative responses from my families, lecturers, friends, and the practitioners and parents I met in the kindergarten where I worked. Some said that it is good to have men working in kindergartens, because boys need ‘male role models’. Some pointed out that men enjoy gender advantage when seeking employment in ECEC. Others including my parents regarded working in a kindergarten as a ‘girls’ job’, and tried to persuade me to choose a career outside the field. All those experiences sparked my curiosity about men’s participation in ECEC, and inspired me to pursue a PhD on this topic. I also wish to work as a researcher in ECEC, so that I could remain in this field but not necessarily working ‘on the front-line’ - a ‘compromise’ that I made in response to the Chinese gender discourses that I was surrounded by at that time.

1.3 Aim and research questions

² *Gaokao* is Mainland China’s national exam for entrance to universities and colleges.

The overarching aim of my PhD project is to question the popular discourse of calling for more men to work in the ECEC workforce in both the UK and China. Framed by the poststructuralist theoretical framework of gender, this research is targeted at answering four research questions:

1. How do practitioners posit themselves as women/men working with young children in ECEC?
2. How do children view their practitioners' gender in relation to their daily interactions?
3. What is the nature of interactions between practitioners and children in ECEC settings? How far and to what extent can these interactions be seen to be gendered, and in what ways?
4. How far and to what extent can culturally-specific gender discourses be seen to have an impact on practitioner-child interactions in Scotland, Hong Kong and Mainland China, and in what ways?

The research questions were developed taking into consideration that the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland (UK) is comprised of four constituent countries of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, and that the countries all have different education systems from each other. Because my PhD study is based in Scotland, I hence selected Scotland to replace the UK as a research site. I also 'separated' Hong Kong from Mainland China and added it as a third research site in this research. This was based on the assumption that Hong Kong might manifest both British and Chinese cultures due to its colonial history and origins (Zhang, 1998; Bray & Koo, 2004). In doing so, this research might be able to extend our knowledge of cross-cultural influences on gender and ECEC in the context of postcolonial globalisation (Chen, 2010).

1.4 Contributions to research gaps and significance of this research

This research will be able to address several research gaps in academic literature. Firstly, it includes both male and female practitioners' perspectives. There is extensive research on men in ECEC that relies merely on men's self-reported subjectivities (Rohrmann & Emilsen, 2015; Rohrmann & Brody, 2015; Joseph & Wright, 2016), but the views of female ECEC practitioners are under-researched. Also under-researched are the views of children themselves (Harris & Barnes, 2009; Rohrmann & Brody, 2015). Therefore, this research seeks to explore children's

own constructions of gender and their perceptions of their relationship with their practitioners. Thirdly, observational data are significantly missing in findings about men's (and women's) contributions as practitioners in ECEC (Rohrmann & Brody, 2015). Most research is reliant on self-reported reflections to arrive at their conclusions. Last but not least, with an increasing recognition of cultural influences in the shaping of a gendered ECEC workforce in different parts of the world (Brody, 2014 & 15; Rohrmann & Brody, 2015), this research is one of the few that employs cross-cultural and comparative approaches to research about gender and men's participation in ECEC. Finally, it also focuses on localities (Scotland, Hong Kong, Mainland China) that are under-researched in relation to this topic, with the majority of English publications in this field are concerned with contexts such as England, Norway, Belgium, New Zealand, Australia (see for example, Brownhill, 2014 & Warin, 2017 [England]; Børve, 2017 [Norway]; Peeters, 2007 & 2013 [Belgium]; Farquhar, 2007 & 2012 [New Zealand]; & Sumsion, 2000 & 2005 [Australia]).

Further, as this research is related to popular public and media concerns about the lack of men in ECEC, about the 'feminisation' of education and about the 'crisis' of boys, the research aims to inform national and local policies seeking to address those concerns, and more broadly, policies that address gender equality and diversity. It might also facilitate changes in understandings of gender and ECEC among the public and the media. Specifically, the research aims to provide insights into how gender impedes equality and diversity in ECEC settings. ECEC providers and practitioners can learn from this research about values and practices that promote an equitable and inclusive ECEC environment, that support children to achieve their full potential, and most importantly, that facilitate quality ECEC.

1.5 Clarifications on key terms

Before moving on to introducing the structure of this dissertation, I will clarify uses of some key terms.

1.5.1 Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)

ECEC is used in this dissertation to describe major provisions for children under the age of 6. This term conforms with the terminology of major international reports and documents such as *Starting Strong 2017 - Key OECD Indicators on Early*

Childhood Education and Care (OECD, 2017b). It is adopted in this research to refer to early years education and child care in Scotland, kindergarten education in Hong Kong, and pre-school education in Mainland China. Accordingly, **ECEC setting(s)** in this research refers to early years centres, nurseries and primary school nursery classes in Scotland; kindergartens and nursery schools in Hong Kong; and kindergartens (*youeryuan*) in Mainland China.

1.5.2 Practitioner(s)

The term **practitioner(s)** used in this dissertation covers early years practitioners, nursery nurses and early years officers in Scotland; kindergarten teachers in Hong Kong; and kindergarten teachers (lead teachers, assistant teachers and ‘care’ teachers) in Mainland China. Where appropriate, specific terms listed here are still used for contextualization purposes in this dissertation. In addition, as the Mainland Chinese and Hong Kongese practitioners both identify themselves as ‘teachers’, the term ‘teacher’ was retained in those practitioners’ and children’s quotes.

1.5.3 China/Chinese

China/Chinese used in this dissertation include both **Mainland China/Mainland Chinese** and **Hong Kong/Hong Kongese**. China/Chinese will be largely used to describe similarities between findings presented about Tianjin and Hong Kong. Mainland China/Mainland Chinese and Hong Kong/Hong Kongese will be used separately to present their distinctive findings.

1.5.4 Culture

Culture in this research employs its broadest sense and covers all meanings that represent the way of life for a group of people (Geertz, 1973; Williams, 1983). Culture, as Alexander (2000) suggests, is all in comparative analysis and understanding and in national systems of education. Alexander (2000) further points out that practices observed in a particular educational setting can only be properly understood by reference to ‘the web of inherited ideas and values, habits and customs, institutions and world views which make on country, or one region, or one group, distinct from another’ (p.5). Therefore, this research will compare **Scottish, Hong Kong and Mainland Chinese cultures** in a sense that they are reflected and practiced in the life of the 17 ECEC settings I visited. Whereas Hong

Kong stands on its own as an urban culture, Scottish and Mainland Chinese national cultures are embedded in this research through urban cultures of Edinburgh and Tianjin - considering that national ECEC systems and curriculums are followed and implemented in the two cities respectively (Gozik, 2012). This research also maintains that culture reflects not only continuity but also change (Bray & Koo, 2004; Tobin, Hsueh, & Karasawa, 2009). Culture is regarded as progressing, changing, space- and time-specific (Tobin et al., 2009); findings and conclusions in this research thus need to be considered with caution if they are applied to other contexts within and beyond Scotland and China.

1.6 Structure of this research

This dissertation is divided into 11 chapters. Chapter 2 details the theoretical framework employed in this research, and chapters 3 & 4 are literature reviews on relevant theories and studies. Chapter 5 describes the methodological framework, followed by descriptions of gender and ECEC contexts in Scotland, Hong Kong and Mainland China in Chapter 6. Chapters 7, 8 & 9 are main findings chapters, and chapter 10 concentrates on comparing and contrasting these findings in relation to the literature reviewed in earlier chapters. In Chapter 11, explicit answers to the study research questions are provided, as well as implications, limitations and recommendations. In detail,

Chapter 2 will discuss relevant gender theories and propose a poststructuralist theoretical framework to understand the dynamics of gender in this research. The main Foucauldian ideas that I will be utilising will be outlined at the beginning of this chapter. I will then move on to a brief discussion of different gender theories and the relationship of these sets of ideas with my own position including biological determinism, gender socialisation and gender psychology, dichotomous thinking, and hegemonic masculinity. Finally, my own poststructuralist theoretical framework will be outlined in relation to gender, including a discussion of aspects such as the social construction of gender and the formation of gendered subjectivities, gender performativity, gender relationality, and gender intersectionality.

Chapter 3 will review academic literature that explores gender in (compulsory) educational contexts. It will discuss how gender 'differences' between boys and

girls are significantly shaped by socialisation and psychological theories of gender. Those theories will then be critiqued in terms of their binary and hierarchical thinking, and of hegemonic masculinity and heterosexuality in education. Alternatively, this chapter will suggest a poststructuralist approach to understanding gender and education. Discussions on children's social constructions of gender, children (un)doing gender, children's gender relations, gender intersections in ECEC, and cultural variations on gender and education will be reviewed.

Chapter 4 will continue to review literature that discusses how and why ECEC becomes a gendered workforce, as well as whether practitioners' gender 'matters' in ECEC, and if so to whom, why and in what ways. Discourses relating to women's 'roles' in societies will be traced through history and linked to debates relating to the ECEC workforce, followed by introductions to the debates on men's participation in ECEC. Subsequently, this chapter will explore practitioners' professional and gender subjectivities, unfolding how practitioners' subjectivities are negotiated discursively and situationally through dominant gender discourses.

Chapter 5 will introduce the methodological approaches utilised in this research. It will defend the uses of multiple approaches to inform about this research, the comparative and cross-cultural approach, and the multi-method approach within a 'poststructuralist' paradigm. The main research methods used in this study will be discussed, including observations in ECEC settings, interviews with ECEC practitioners, and pictorial activities with children. There will also be descriptions on the sampling and recruitments of participants, the data collection and analysis processes, and ethical considerations. Lastly, this chapter will include my own reflections on my own subjective positionings in relation to this research.

Chapter 6 will contextualize this research by introducing the broader cultures and ECEC systems in Scotland, Hong Kong and Mainland China in relation to gender. I will also discuss current situations on gender balance and men's participation in ECEC in the three researched localities.

Chapter 7 will present findings on practitioners' gender subjectivities working in ECEC, under the themes of selecting ECEC as a career, their perceptions and

experience regarding working in ECEC (including the negotiation of wider social perceptions of the ‘appropriate’ gendered workforce and conceptions of the potential ‘stigma’ associated with men’s participation), and future career plans. A particular focus will be placed on themes relating to practitioners’ gendered experiences and understandings of working in ECEC, such as their perceived ‘roles’ and perceived gender differences in interactions with children.

Chapter 8 will present findings on children’s views in relation to their practitioners’ gender. It will present how bodies are viewed as gendered in children’s eyes, how gender stereotypes are picked up by children in the early stages of their life, as well as how children actively reproduce, subvert and deconstruct existing gender structures. Practitioners’ reflections will also be included to complement children’s opinions in this chapter.

Chapter 9 will present gender as dynamic and performative in practitioner-child interactions in ECEC. It will present how gender is used as a category to organize classroom activities and to allocate workforce responsibilities. It will also present how practitioner-child interactions can be both gendered or less gendered in aspects like communications, rough and tumble play, discipline, ‘snitching’, physical contact, intimacy, pedagogy and personal relations. Some noteworthy gender incidences will also be provided in the chapter to exemplify gender dynamics and gender performativity.

Chapter 10 will draw together the main findings presented in Chapters 7, 8 & 9 and discuss the extent and nature of gender-diversity and -‘flexibility’ of ECEC practitioners, children as active gender ‘performers’, and the extent and nature of ‘gender-sensitive’ interactions in ECEC classrooms. Based on these discussions, this chapter will talk about how gender affects ECEC pedagogy and quality, followed by proposals of a cross-cultural approach to gender and ECEC.

Chapter 11 will conclude this thesis with explicit answers to the four research questions, with an emphasis on summarizing key gender discourses that emerged in this research. Theoretical and practical implications will be discussed, and limitations and recommendations will be suggested.

Following this structure, the thesis will now continue to discuss my theoretical framework in Chapter 2.

Chapter 2 Understanding gender through poststructuralism

In the coming chapters, there will be explorations into appropriate understandings of gender for the purpose of the current study. Ideas from Michel Foucault, Judith Butler, Raewyn Connell, and many others, who have fired topical debates on gender and beyond during the recent two centuries, will underpin the main discussions of gender in *Chapter 2*. I will then move on to review the possible roles and importance that gender could play in constructing (early) childhood and education in *Chapter 3*. The discussion narrows down to interrelations between practitioners' gender and children's education and care in *Chapter 4*, and particularly in the context of calling for men to work as educators and/or carers for young children in a majority of contemporary societies. To begin with, this current chapter will use Foucault's thoughts around power and discourse to exemplify some of the dominant gender discourses in mainstream societies, as well as to elaborate on poststructuralist views of gender.

2.1 Doing Foucault: a starting point

At the core of Foucault's contributions to poststructuralism lie the relationships between power and knowledge, and how more powerful forms of knowledge are often historically and socially constructed as objective 'truth' (Foucault, 1977). Foucault pointed out that the various forms of knowledge concerning our world are politically created in the context of particular historical periods and/or societal communities (Foucault, 1997; MacNaughton, 2005). There is no 'truth' in a relation to an objective, independently existing 'reality' out there to be 'discovered' by humans, but rather, humans are actively producing those truths. From Foucault's perspective, the 'naturalness' of the earth and our bodies is meaningless themselves, and only makes sense when understood and interpreted in historical and social contexts (Foucault, 1977 & 1978). For example, the 'natural' mountains make no sense to human beings on their own, whilst it is how the mountains are understood as sources and utilized in human activities that is important. Furthermore, the concept 'mountain' is a human categorisation of particular aspects of physical landscape that varies according to temporal and cultural contexts. The same point of view could apply to our bodies which on the one hand, are only meaningful in terms of how bodies are embodied in social relations; and on the other hand, become what they are culturally constructed to

be today owing to social and historical transformations. A more detailed discussion on how bodies relate to gender according to poststructuralist thought will come later in this chapter, and indeed it is beyond the scope of this study to explore in detail why and how the ‘truths’ about our world and selves come into being (see for example Gordon, 1980 and Faubion, 2001, for more about Foucault’s work on this). What I would like to emphasize is that, according to Foucault (1977 & 1980), some of the knowledge produced in the historical and social processes becomes dominant in shaping our understandings, and is implicitly practiced through power relations in our society as ‘truths’. That said, those so-called ‘truths’ are never fixed or universal. They are fluid, challengeable, subject to social and historical changes, and may vary across and within cultures (Foucault, 1980; Rabinow, 1988; Faubion, 2001; MacNaughton, 2005; Downing, 2008).

However, Foucault (1980) elucidated that in the process of how some knowledge becomes dominant through the play of power, the power is often masked. The knowledge becomes ideologies that we hold implicitly (Foucault, 1977), and as summarized by MacNaughton (2005), we therefore ‘take for granted the power structures in social institutions, social structures and social expectations’ (p.6). Foucault’s work thus leads us to unfold the ways in which knowledge operates through power (Foucault, 1980; Downing, 2008), so that power structures can be understood more transparently, and possibly be transformed or resisted for the sake of social justice and equity. Foucault and those influenced by his thought tend to agree that all knowledge is political and serves certain groups’ interests (Foucault, 1980; Gordon, 1980; Rabinow, 1988; MacNaughton, 2005; Downing, 2008), implying that there are also groups of people that the politics of knowledge does not serve. This perspective explains why social injustice and inequalities exist in our societies, by virtue of the ‘regimes of truth’ (Foucault, 1980). Being fluid, actors have attempted to subvert such regimes to achieve social justice and equalities in contemporary society (Blaise, 2005). Specifically, there has emerged a growing body of writers who focus on examining gender as a primary element of the ‘regimes of truth’ that result in social injustice and inequalities (see for example, Butler, 1990; Blaise, 2005; Holmes, 2007; Connell & Pearse, 2015). Drawing on Foucault’s work, they have been able to expand and enhance poststructuralist perspectives in the field of gender studies (Palmer, 1997; Butler, 1990).

2.2 Distinguishing gender from sex and/or sexuality

Foucault's ideas are adopted in gender studies in the way that gender is treated as one aspect of the political regimes of truth that is practiced through power in our societies. Therefore, gender is, on the one hand, organized through social structures and norms, constraining human beings' behaviours and social relations; on the other hand, gender structures and norms can be culturally different, subject to social changes, and constructed by individuals actively. I have discussed in the last section that, some knowledge produced through social and historical processes have become powerful 'doctrines' or 'regimes of truth' that the majority of human beings are expected to follow (in certain spaces and time). Those shared understandings, thinking, and ways of doing are what constitute social structures and norms, albeit poststructuralists see these structures and norms as more fluid than structuralist work. And in suggesting both the normativity and powerfulness of them, Foucault (1972 & 1980) demonstrated the concept of discourse. Through the analysis of discourse, the mechanism of how knowledge and power work to establish social orders becomes explicit (Foucault, 1980). Knowledge works to 'normalise' discourses, and dominant discourses become 'regimes of truth' that control subjects' thoughts and behaviours (Foucault, 1972; 1978; & 1980). Lessa (2006) has provided a comprehensive summary of Foucault's definition of discourse: '[Discourses are] systems of thoughts composed of ideas, attitudes, courses of actions, beliefs and practices that systematically construct the subjects and the worlds of which they speak' (p.285). In gender studies, academics are particularly interested in how certain discourses operate to normalise gender, and ultimately produce inequalities (Foucault, 1978; Blaise, 2005). Such discourses include biological determinism, gender socialization, psychological studies, and most profoundly heterosexuality in our contemporary world (Butler, 1990; Alloway, 1995; Mac an Ghail, 1996; Butler, 2004; Blaise, 2005; Holmes, 2007; Connell & Pearse, 2015), each enacting multiple discourses within and beyond. Drawing on Foucault's (1980) notion of scientific thought as a 'regime of truth', many discourses of gender biology, socialisation, and psychology gain legitimacy through their appeals to 'science' and therefore, become powerful and normative in constructing subjects' gender identities and performances. By providing brief introductions to those discourses

here, this research will later analyse how they are related to certain types of practitioner-child interactions found in different settings and various cultures.

2.2.1 Biological determinism as ‘taken-for-granted’

In many of the so-called ‘Western’ studies of gender, biological determinism is seen as a major problem in prohibiting gender equalities (Butler, 1990; Holmes, 2007; Connell & Pearse, 2015). This perspective itself is presented in several forms. Firstly, gender tends to be seen as naturally bonded with our bodies, and gender differences are automatically originated from bodily differences such as the possession of what scientific discourse categorises as genitals (Alloway, 1995; Beasley, 2005). Nevertheless, the cultural constructedness of this is emphasized by those who do not possess some of these genitals. For example, people who are born with both ‘male’ and ‘female’ genitals are almost always operated on where such technology exists, in order to assign them to one category or another. Also, if someone has to have parts of their body such as breasts or penis removed due to sickness or injury, they are not then de-categorised. The connection between bodies and gender are then often used in sociocultural discourse to justify men’s superiority over women in terms of men’s ‘natural’ physicality, sexuality, intellectuality, and so on (Connell & Pearse, 2015). However, those advantages are disputable because bodily differences are never universal between men and women. If considering what societies construct as ‘men’ and ‘women’ and comparing them for sake of disputing the legitimacy of these categorisations, there are, in reality, some women physically stronger than some men, taller than some men, and so forth. And there are bodily differences within men and women as well, considering eye, hair or skin colours, and many other cultural distinctions that could be made on these grounds but are generally not.

The second approach of biological determinism addresses these distinctions, and uses ‘sex’ and ‘gender’ to distinguish biological and sociocultural differences between men and women respectively. But gender differences are still treated as determined by universal sex differences as described above, failing to explain social and cultural variations of gender that have consistently been discovered by anthropologists (see for example: Mascia-Lees & Black, 2000; Nanda, 2000). Connell and Pearse (2015) further argued that bodies (including biological sexes) are embodied in the social processes and are influenced by food distribution,

sexual customs, warfare, work, sport, urbanisation, education, medicine, and other social arrangements. To illustrate, some men and women will go to gym and work on their bodies in alignment with body images that are widely presented in popular social media. In Thailand, men would sometimes take medication to ‘feminize’ their bodies for economic capital (Nanda, 2000). Since all these arrangements are to various extents, structured by gender, Francis (2008) suggests that gender does not necessarily flow from sexed bodies. At the same time, Connell and Pearse (2015) advocate that gender may precede bodies and condition how bodies develop and live. An example of this can be the Albanian sworn virgins, who lived as men in a patriarchal society albeit in possession of culturally categorized ‘women bodies’ (Nanda, 2000). Both sex and gender are socially constructed meanings to make sense of our bodies in social processes. This is even evident in the fact that in some cultures such as China, there is no separation in the daily use of languages that describe sex and gender. The word ‘*xingbie*’ (literally meaning a difference [*bie*] of individual nature or tendencies [*xing*], Shen and D’Ambrosio, n.d.) is usually used as a category in separating men and women / male and female (‘*nan ren*’ and ‘*nv ren*’ in Chinese), and can refer to both one’s biological sex and sociocultural gender identities in Chinese culture. So saying someone is ‘*nan ren*’ can mean either that you are a man (biologically) or that you possess male characteristics that are expected in Chinese culture. It is thus impossible and superfluous, to assert biological sex determinism on gender. Meanwhile, poststructuralists concerned with social justice would emphasize how both conceptualizations intertwine to produce social meanings that impede equality.

2.2.2 *The power of gender socialisation and gender psychology*

Despite the broad and sustained challenges to biological determinism in contemporary academic studies of gender issues, it is still a powerful discourse that shapes part (if not all) of the gendered arrangements in our society (Alloway, 1995; Blaise, 2005; Holmes, 2007; Connell & Pearse, 2015). The biological division of sex becomes persistently socially significant via enhancement of theories on gender socialisation and gender psychology. Gender socialisation assumes that there are fixed gender roles that men and women are to be socialized into, in accordance with their biological sexes (Williams, 1993; Sumsion, 2005). Although it shifts from the assumption that people naturally own gender characteristics to

the recognition of gender being learned through social learning, the social learning is considered to be tied and confined to a biological base (Alloway, 1995). Similarly, many gender psychological studies seek to identify genetically-related differences between men and women through experiments, or to claim that the ‘genderisation’ of boys and girls are different psychological processes (Heward, 1996; Mascia-Lees & Black, 2000; Chu, 2014). Mascia-Lees & Black (2000), Blaise (2005), Beasley (2005), Francis (2006), Connell & Pearse (2015) and many other gender researchers agree that psychological ideas about gender have long-lastingly been popular and persuasive, but they nevertheless put forward a challenge to both gender socialisation and psychology theories. For example, gender socialisation implies that people are passively learning and accepting how to be a men/women, whereas studies such as Thorne (1993), Blaise (2005), Saunton (2012) and Crivello, Vu, & Vennam (2014) suggest that children actively construct their gender. Psychological experiments are contested to be superficial and weak in concluding that men and women are different, and an increasing number of studies reviewed by Connell and Pearse (2015) actually found more similarities between the two sexes. Most importantly, both sociological and psychological ideas that claim gender differences between men and women assume gender as universal and fixed, and do not account for social changes and cultural varieties (Alloway, 1995). How these two approaches could affect children’s education and care concerning gender and beyond in the early childhood environment, will be investigated in the next two chapters.

2.2.3 Dichotomous thinking and its regimes

Poststructuralist researchers have argued that a wide range of theories and approaches from biological determinism to gender socialisation and psychology (for example, Freudian psychoanalytic and brain theories [Heward, 1996; Rogers & Rogers, 2001; Francis, 2006]), have been framed by a dichotomous way of thinking that polarizes gender into binary categories. It largely ignores, and hence inferiorizes, other forms of sex and gender realities that are beyond the dimorphic. According to Western studies, dichotomous thinking was enhanced by the influential Enlightenment thought that shapes contemporary intelligibility in the modern West, and was spread to many other parts of the world through imperialism and colonialism (Derrida, 1979; Midgley, 1998; Miescher, Mitchell, & Shibusawa, 2015). As imperialism and colonialism were embedded through power

(Clarke, 1997; Connell & Pearse, 2015), the dichotomous thinking also became powerful regimes that governs hierarchical gender arrangements in some societies. In Chinese culture, dichotomous thinking of gender can be traced back to periods even before Confucian and Daoist traditions of thought, worded as *yin* (generally representing woman/female) and *yang* (generally representing man/male) and providing a deep-rooted foundation in Chinese philosophy of gender (Shen & D'Ambrosio, n.d.). Recognizing that dichotomous thinking stands as a dominant ideology in mainstream societies, this research points to the increasing appeal to challenging it. Anthropological studies have already frequently contended that dichotomous divisions of sex and/or gender are not found in all cultures (Mac an Ghaill & Haywood, 2007), and gender researchers are consistently referring to the inabilities of dichotomous thinking in understanding our plural world (Butler, 1990; Holmes, 2007; Connell & Pearse, 2015). With an increasing wave of LGBTQ+³ communities fighting for their rights and equalities, a pluralized view of gender is challenging conservative dichotomous thinking (Butler, 1990 & 2004; Alloway, 1995; Blaise, 2005). This study will examine how dichotomous thinking is both persistent and negotiated in the researched gender cultures.

2.2.4 *Hegemonic heterosexuality*

Dichotomous thinking not only represses non-dimorphic gender possibilities, but also enacts imbalanced hierarchies at its two gendered sides. Such mechanisms are understood in the light of heterosexuality and its opposed others. In addressing the reproductive function of heterosexual practices, heterosexuality is socially constructed as a dominant framework within which gender subjectivities are formed (Butler, 1990 & 2004). The biological and sociological importance of reproduction in human development, and its consequent caring arrangements, prescribe men's and women's social roles and even work to perpetuate and exacerbate disadvantage for women and other marginalised populations (Williams, 1993; Blaise, 2005) because they are either dependent on men in the reproduction process or are non-reproductive (Holmes, 2007). Gender orders are therefore deemed to be constructed by heterosexuality in such a way that superiorizes certain ways of being a man to being a woman or otherwise. Nevertheless, similar to the sex-gender relationship argued above, gender and sexuality are not necessarily unseparated, and are never singularly linked in causal or structural

³ Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning, and others.

relations (Butler, 1990). There are examples of men and women who have sex with people of the same gender as themselves, yet perform 'heterosexual' gender roles [such as husbands and/or fathers in heterosexual family structures] and indeed identify as heterosexual. And Butler (1990) argued that some gender orders are produced to secure heterosexuality, rather than from sexual practices. Having said that, I do not mean to claim that heterosexuality is not conditioning gender. Gender as a social construction is based on 'heterosexual contract' (Wittig, 1980) and 'compulsory heterosexuality' (Rich, 1980), and is shaped by a model of 'heterosexual matrix' (Butler, 1990). Through heterosexual matrix, gender (masculine and feminine) is confined to express 'bodily sex' (male and female) in stable ways that are oppositionally and hierarchically defined - that is, compulsory practice of heterosexuality (ibid). Therefore, 'to understand gender it is necessary to realise the power and pervasiveness of heterosexuality' (Blaise, 2005, p.22) in particular times and spaces.

2.3 Gender in contemporary contexts

Indeed, these discourses of gender as demonstrated are all products of knowledge in specific historical and social contexts, and through the operation of power they are still influencing contemporary gender understandings and behaviours (Butler, 1990; Alloway, 1995; Butler, 2004; Blaise, 2005; Holmes, 2007; Connell & Pearse, 2015). At the same time, new gender understandings may emerge in the ongoing processes of social changes and transformations. On the one hand, new gender understandings are facilitated by the changes of societies; and on the other hand, they are possibly pushing forward social transformations by challenging the power of existing discourses of gender. More importantly, our understandings of gender can never be complete. Butler (1990) stated that 'gender is a complexity whose totality is permanently deferred, never fully what it is at any given juncture in time' (p.22). Connell and Pearse (2015) summarized that gender is not reflected in simple differences or fixed categories, but is connected to relationships, boundaries, practices, identities and images that are actively created in social processes. Gender discourses 'come into existence in particular historical circumstances, shape the lives of people in profound and often contradictory ways, and are subject to historical struggle and change' (Connell & Pearse, 2015, p.32). The following paragraphs will explore some of the new ways of interpreting gender that are discussed in gender studies, which will be later used in this research to

discuss how those interpretations are contradicting and/or negotiating with the above listed gender discourses in the contexts of early childhood education and care.

2.3.1 The social construction of gender

Although gender is embodied in fluid and complex ways as relationships, practices, identities, and so on (Skelton & Francis, 2003; Connell & Pearse, 2015), rather than being something fixed or universal that is biologically determined or can be socialized into, gender is never random or arbitrary. Instead, gender is socially constructed (Alloway, 1995; Francis, 2006). The social construction of gender can be understood in two aspects. In the first place, gender is confined to some social structures and norms in any specific time and space, and therefore may present a certain level of coherence and continuity for a period of time in a culture (Butler, 1990). Unlike structuralism which assumes permanent and universal structures/orders of things (Palmer, 1997), poststructuralism sees those structures and norms as socially instituted and maintained (Butler, 1990). In other words, they are always fluid/flexible, contextual and changing. As a result, gender is socially constructed as both a relatively stable structure and continuously changeable in practice. In the second place, the social construction of gender is not passive. Gender not merely results from social conditioning, but it is actively responding to social dynamics. Gender establishes its orders and arrangements in adjustment to and for protection of the wider social structures that it is part of. Gender orders and arrangements may change according to social changes, and can also be persistent. For example, even though more and more women are undertaking economic activities outside the family home and an increasing number of men are taking over domestic caring, the gender arrangement that men are breadwinners and women are family carers is still dominant among many cultures (Blaise, 2005; Chan, 2011; Ho & Lam, 2014). Most importantly, gender itself has always been the battlefield at which social consolidations, changes, and transformations happen (Butler, 1990; Alloway, 1995; Holmes, 2007; Connell & Pearse, 2015).

2.3.2 Gender performativity: ‘doing’ gender

Gender therefore can be treated as a social structure itself (like Butler’s [1990] ‘heterosexual matrix’), which normalizes individuals’ gender behaviours and

relationships at a given period and in a certain society. But again, individuals do not passively accept gender as a structure and are actively produce it through ‘performing’ it. Butler (1990 & 2004) described this process as ‘gender performativity’. One aspect of gender performativity includes repeating, performing, and embodying gender norms through language and actions (Blaise, 2005); and this type of gender performativity internalizes and ‘naturalizes’ gender into ‘manufactures’ of our bodies, for a culturally sustained temporal duration (Butler, 1990). Additionally, gender performativity will be contextual and situational (Sumsion, 2005). Under different circumstances, individuals may perform gender differently. Examples of situational gender performances can be found in *Chapter 3* with regards to how children perform gender in a wide range of school contexts. Butler (2004) further illustrated the possibilities of individuals ‘doing’ and ‘undoing’ gender. That is, one may perhaps follow or not follow normative gender orders. Such doing and undoing rely on individuals’ willing, but are at a certain expense. Sometimes obeying gender normativity can undo one’s personhood, and undermine capacity to lead a livable life (ibid). Sometimes not following gender norms is at the cost of persistence and survival in personal life (ibid). If a boy is deemed to be ‘effeminate’ according to dominant social discourses (see *Chapter 3 & 4* for detail), his confidence and self-esteem might be adversely affected when dominant discursive constructions of being a boy are frequently being referred to; and when he ignores those gender norms, he is possibly regarded by his surroundings as ‘abnormal’. Both situations will not be easy for him.

To what extent individuals conform to gender or undo it, and to what extent one can lead a livable life or better when confronting different kinds of gender performativity, are closely related to each individual’s subjectivity and agency. Foucault (1982) claimed that human beings are socially made subjects in power relations, and Blaise (2005) defined subjectivity as how one relates one to the social world, consciously or unconsciously. Therefore, throughout this thesis, gender ‘subjectivity’ is used to describe findings on practitioners’ and children’s views and reflections on gender, in alignment with Foucault’s (1982) social formation of subjects and the process of subjectification (Davies, 2006); rather than gender ‘identity’, a term argued by Hollway (1984) to be more frequently used by psychologists. Associated with his/her subjectivity, each one has agency

that is concerned with one's ability to make choices of accepting, resisting, subverting, and changing discourses, as well as with one's capacity to deal with the consequences of such choices (Blaise, 2005; Osgood, 2006). Individuals' subjectivity and agency are not autonomic, arbitrary or infinite, but are socially constructed too (Alloway, 1995; Ebrahim, 2011). They may be constrained to various degrees by social discourses, and are actively contributing to social transformations at the same time. Indeed, gender, individual subjectivity and agency, and many other aspects of our societies are all socially constructed in the ways as described above, and they all intertwine in the dynamic and complex grids of society. They can be interactional, mutually influential, radical, circular, and are never singular.

2.3.3 Gender as relational

Hence gender should not be explained on its own. I have already elaborated earlier that according to poststructuralist feminists, gender refers not to simple differences or fixed categories that humans possess, but is embodied in social relations. The concept of (hegemonic) masculinity is relational to that of femininity, and many feminist studies have focused on the ways in which women become subordinated to men through the hierarchical relations between masculinity and femininity, in order to address issues of gendered social injustice and inequality (Donaldson, 1993; Adams & Savran, 2002; Blaise, 2005; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Francis, 2006 & 2012). Heterosexuality only becomes dominant when constructed and performed in relation to other forms of sexuality: its powerfulness does not make any sense in isolation. There are also many examples where a person of one gender may be placed in a more advantageous relation of power in some gender relations but not in others (Nanda, 2000). In Thorne's (1993) *Gender Play*, she also exemplified shifts of power between boys and girls in various relationships (for example, boys would dominate the playgrounds when girls and boys are out for free activities, whereas girls usually have more control in deciding which boys could join them in the 'house corner' play; see also *Chapter 3*). What is more, gender as relational may itself suggest an imbalance of power distributions among different social groups. For instance, Francis (2006) notes that where a lack of masculinity denotes femininity, a lack of femininity does not appear to denote masculinity. Gender relations turn out to

be neither mutually binary, nor simply singular. And gender relations are multivariable.

2.3.4 Gender and intersectionality

As gender is embodied in social relations, it is not the only factor that contributes to those complex relations. I have already elaborated on how sex, sexuality and gender interwine with each other in constructing gendered social orders and beyond. And there are still more societal categories that intersectionally operate together with gender in influencing a person's construction of the world and social relations within it. To illustrate, when in some societies hard labour is deemed to be men's responsibility, there are also women from low socioeconomic status who are doing it. Such women's work is discounted and does not challenge the discourse of hard labour as masculine, because of both classed and gendered power relations/inequality (Osgood, Francis, & Archer, 2006). The experiences of acting in the world and being reacted to as a lesbian will be complicated by many different facets, for example due to differences in 'race'/ethnicity, age, and social class (Shields, 2008). The ideas of intersections among social categories, through decades of development, have formed a range of 'intersectionality theories and intersectionally-informed methodologies' (Zwier & Grant, 2014) that have been increasingly applied to gender studies (Lutz, Vivar, & Supik, 2011). A good summary from Zwier and Grant (2014) phrases that intersectionality 'seeks to explain, critique, and transform relationships of difference within and across one or more levels or social spheres, taking into account the working of power through fluid, context-specific, co-constructed identity categories' (pp.10-11). An expansion on this summary may entail three aspects. Firstly, there are various levels of power domains where the dynamics of intersectionality need to be explored, including both micro- (like individual experiences and everyday interactions) and macro-levels (such as political and institutional cultures) (Crenshaw, 1991; Collins, 2000; Zwier & Grant, 2014). Secondly, the power effects generated by different categories are profoundly inscribed in historical and societal terms, and it is the numerous overlaps between those categories that form the basis for the hierarchisation of groups and the formation of unequal social relations (Lutz et al., 2011). Thirdly, all social categories, be it gender, class, race, or socioeconomic status (to name some of the most obvious ones), are

all socially constructed in the ways I have demonstrated earlier and are co-constituted and co-constitutive in the social constructions.

In different times and spaces, different social categories may embody diversified levels of dominance and power. Usually social justice studies tend to focus on the relationship between the dominant, privileged, hegemonic sides of societal structural categories and their antitheses (Lutz et al. 2011). But this does not mean that intersectionality is a universal instrument in understanding social phenomena. Instead, it is ambiguous (in a positive way) and open-ended (Davis, 2008). It does not provide a fixed and/or simplified way of looking into gender issues and otherwise, and initiates a process of discovering our complicated and contradictory world (ibid). The analysis of intersectionality should be specific to the research to which it is applied; and however broad a single project can be, it can hardly do justice to all dimensions of the concept of intersectionality simultaneously (Lutz et al. 2011). Therefore, for instance, the current research is still putting a focus on gender, whilst other societal categories (such as age, role and class) are discussed in terms of their intersections with gender, in the contexts of gendered practitioner-child interactions in different early childhood settings. Also, gender's intersection with culture is important in this research, being a cross-cultural study and adopting an international perspective.

2.4 Summary

This chapter has focused on an outline of Foucault's poststructuralist theoretical approach and expanded on others' applications of poststructuralism in relation to the study of gender dynamics. It has reviewed the power and challengeability of some of the conventional gender discourses such as biological determinism, gender socializations, and psychological gender differences based on psychoanalytic and/or brain theories. In many contemporary societies, those discourses are still impacting on the organization of social institutions and individual daily practices to a certain extent, and are also being contested in many fields for the addressing of social justice and equity (Alloway, 1995; Mascia-Lees & Black, 2000; Blaise, 2005; Beasley, 2005; Francis, 2006; Connell & Pearse, 2015). New theories emerging in the past few decades therefore tend to view gender more as complicated social relations that are socially constructed through historical and social consolidations and transformations, are embodied in various

power relations at a wide range of social levels, and are intersectionally functioning in a system comprised of many categories of identities and social aspects. The operation of gender should never be understood as a simple picture. It has many dimensions and dynamics, and is connected with a variety of other social positionings.

What is more, gender is widely regarded as a political term by poststructuralists nowadays (Waylen, Karen, Kantola, & Weldon, 2013; Krook & Childs, 2013; Shepherd, 2015; Bryson, 2016), and is frequently utilized by academics and politicians both to govern and to challenge existing social rules. Gender politics are especially active elements in the international development agenda that addresses social justice and equality, like the previous United Nations Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the most recent Post-2015 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). To illustrate, the fifth goal of SDGs is targeted at achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls (United Nations, 2015). And it can be seen here that power is an essential element of gender politics. Having an awareness of gender being political would thus enable more explicit understanding of gender power. Blaise (2005) pointed out that for practitioners and children in the early childhood classroom, understanding gender politics is important for the purpose of gender equity for girls and boys. This thesis will hence include some of the international and national policies that would shed light on and frame gender and education/care in *Chapter 6*.

Overall, although keeping in mind that the myths and dynamics in our social and material world can never be fully understood, nor can any theoretical framework perfectly explain everything, I believe that poststructuralist views of gender can facilitate some different understandings about education and care, especially when developmental theories are so popular in this field (Blaise, 2005; Palaiologou, 2012). For the purpose of this particular research, it is expected that the theoretical framework listed above will unfold how cultural and historical understandings of gender influence people's daily behaviours, and how this can be fluid and variable in different cultures and situations. More specifically, the framework will be used to investigate in what ways (early) childhood education and care are gendered, how gender complexities are embodied in educational contexts, how the wider social and political institutions of gender are reflected in

education, how these poststructuralist views of gender may influence how practitioners teach and educate, and how children are actively constructing their gender through gendered interactions with their peers, practitioners, and their wider communities.

Chapter 3 Gender in educational contexts

Education, broadly speaking, has been an important site for gender and its accompanied wider social reforms during what has been categorized as three ‘waves’ of feminist thought and activism (Dillabough, 2006; Walkerdine & Ringrose, 2006; Weiner, 2006; Skelton & Francis, 2009; Wingrave, 2016). Specifically in the ‘battlefield’ of education and care, these waves started with an effort to achieve women’s and girls’ equal rights to education in first-wave feminism (Weiner, 2006), and continued to contest against the inequalities that women and girls experienced in educational institutions in the second (Walkerdine & Ringrose, 2006). Such inequalities were deemed to be well linked with the social structures that are organized in relation to reproduction and sexuality and thus disadvantage women in terms of allocated gender roles (Weiner, 2006). Education in this sense is argued to be actually ‘teach[ing] girls their place’ (Walkerdine & Ringrose, 2006: p.31). Since the emergence of ‘third-wave’ feminism, feminists have become more alerted to women’s (and men’s) unique experiences that are specific to the social, historical, political and cultural contexts they are within (Kinser, 2004; Weiner, 2006). This has resulted in an increasing body of research that focuses on girls’ (and boys’) experiences of gender as embodied in their specific school environments and beyond.

Gender experiences in educational settings are complicated, and may entail different issues at the various stages of formal education/schooling. For example, in higher education sectors, gender is relevant to women’s participation, choices of majors, and much more concerning women’s and men’s gendered experiences (Delamont, 2006; Francis, Burke, & Read, 2014); in technical and vocational education, a gender focus shifts to the strongly masculinized nature of this sector and the wider labour market (Leathwood, 2006); and in primary and secondary schooling, the gaps between boys and girls in terms of academic achievement, together with the gendered patterns of girls’ and boys’ preferences towards certain subject areas, are of significant concern to educationalists in recent decades (Francis, 2000; Skelton, 2006; Francis, Skelton, & Read, 2012). Poststructuralist researchers and educators further direct those concerns into the broader issues of pupils’ constructions of social identities and peer relations (for example, Ashley, 2003; Davison & Frank, 2006; Skelton & Francis, 2009; Francis

et al., 2012). Those issues have been extended to research in early childhood education and care (ECEC), too. In this chapter, I will mainly discuss how children in ECEC classrooms encounter gender complexities; and gender issues in primary and secondary educational contexts will also be referred to where necessary. The chapter begins with discussions on the ways in which particular discourses of gender (as outlined in *chapter 2*) can constrain children's educational experiences. It then continues to demonstrate how new ways of understanding gender, also elucidated in *Chapter 2*, arguably need to be encouraged in ECEC.

3.1 Challenging the gender 'differences' between boys and girls in schools

3.1.1 Socialization and psychological approaches to gender and education

In *Chapter 2*, I have listed three forms of gender discourse that frame gender differences between 'men' and 'women'. Namely, they include biological determinism, gender socialization, and developmental psychological approaches. Blaise (2005), MacNaughton (2006), Walkerdine and Ringrose (2006) have noticed that sex-role socialization theory and developmental psychology tend to be the dominant conceptualizations that influence gender understandings in ECEC. I have already demonstrated that those theories attach universal, fixed and essentialist characteristics to men's and women's perceived biological 'sex', thus informing ways of teaching and learning that would actually limit children's educational experiences. To illustrate, sex-role socialization theory depicts that children observe, imitate and model from adults' behaviours according to their corresponding sexes, and consequently develop into gender-appropriate adults themselves (MacNaughton, 2006). Adult educators guided by this discourse would then intervene in children's sexist and biased behaviour so that boys and girls are behaved in expected, 'correct' ways (Blaise, 2005). Examples of these interventions may include practitioners assigning classroom duties according to children's gender, praising girls according to their appearance and praising boys for their ability, and promoting "learned helplessness" in girls while challenging boys to be independent (Strasser & Koeppel, 2011). All are deemed to be narrowing children's possibilities in achieving their full potential (Estola, 2011). Similarly, developmental psychological studies, especially theories of 'brain difference' that justify 'natural' developmental differences between men and women (Francis, 2006), could guide practitioners in having different expectations towards boys and girls. Practitioners are usually more tolerant of boys' boisterous

behaviours because they would regard these as how boys ‘naturally’ develop [although paradoxically, they are also trying to suppress those behaviours] (Blaise, 2005). Boys are often expected to be better at subjects like mathematics and science, whereas girls are expected to be performing better in literacy due to their ‘gendered’ brains (Boaler & Sengupta-Irving, 2006). Such psychological differences, however, have already been proved to be insufficient and thus impeding children’s full potential in those assumingly ‘gendered’ aspects (ibid).

3.1.2 Binary thinking and its hierarchies in education

Socialization and developmental psychological approaches to teaching and learning not only are criticized to be inadequate for children’s development and wellbeing (Alloway, 1995; Blaise, 2005), but also imply inequalities between boys and girls, and/or within these dichotomous, constructed categories. I mentioned in *Chapter 2* that underpinning all gendered differences between men and women lies the perpetuated binary way of thinking, and there exist hierarchies between the two ends of the binaries. When children are socialized into traditionally gendered roles that are organized around social hierarchies, such as when boys are taught to be independent and to be responsible as main breadwinners for the family home, and girls are taught to be domestic carers, the wider social inequalities between men and women are being reproduced and practiced since childhood. When brain theories claim that boys and girls are different in thinking and learning and are thus performing differently in subject areas like sciences and literacy, a hierarchical representation that men are more likely to secure positions in socially dominated fields (like science industries and politics) is reflected. More importantly, the dichotomous thinking of gender marginalizes those boys and girls who challenge dominant gender constructions. As Francis (2012) puts it, gender functions as a ‘monoglossic’ system (following a theory of language developed by Bakhtin), within which any alternatives outside the dominant, binarised gender matrix may be purified and eradicated. Nonetheless, there is abundant research that shows boys and girls crossing gender boundaries as part of their school experiences (which I will explore in detail soon in this chapter), alluding to Francis’ (2012) argument that all productions of subjectivity manifest gender ‘heteroglossia’ that are aspects of parody and dissonance in relation to gender monoglossia. However, Sauntson (2012) states that the dichotomous gender normativity (gender monoglossia) is clearly bounded in the school environment,

and anyone who transgresses those boundaries (gender heteroglossia) is emotionally and even physically punished. She further suggests that the impacts of such punishments could include social and emotional effects like low self-esteem, fear of being in and disengagement from school, as well as academic underachievement (ibid).

3.1.3 Hegemonic masculinity and heterosexuality in ECEC

The unequal status of boys and girls in schools, as well as a polarized gender normativity, mirror what Connell (2005) describes as the culturally constructed 'hegemonic masculinity' and what Butler (1990) metaphorizes as the 'heterosexual matrix'. Hegemonic masculinity is the dominant masculinity in the 'matrix' that regulates and subordinates other patterns of masculinity and femininity, and heterosexuality politically disadvantages women and other marginalized populations as I have already demonstrated in *Chapter 2, Section 2.3.2* (Butler, 1990; Blaise, 2005). The recently topical debates on boys' academic underachievement and the so-called 'crisis of masculinity' (that boys are unable to meet gendered expectations of being masculine) have reflected such constructions. It is argued that boys are somehow privileged when their so-called 'underachievement' (a more complex issue, with significant variation in relation to subject, as well as in relation to social class and ethnicity - see for example, Francis et al., 2012; Sauntson, 2012) is particularly addressed by public concerns and research; and as such, it is also detrimental to girls' education (Skelton & Read, 2006). Furthermore, the general public tend to blame boys' underachievement on the 'feminization' of schooling and lack of male teachers/practitioners, which denigrates female teachers'/practitioners' contribution to education (Ashley, 2003; Mills, Martino, & Lingard, 2004; Sumsion, 2005; Chan, 2011; Tennhoff, Nentwich, & Vogt, 2015). Even some boys are disadvantaged when they fail to meet the gender expectations of hegemonic masculinity (Skelton & Read, 2006). A further account for the complexities regarding how hegemonic masculinity and heterosexuality are embedded in the early childhood classroom will soon be given below in 3.2. Here I would like to emphasize that such complexities, referred to by Butler (1990) as the 'heterosexual matrix', are important for understanding gender equity for boys and girls and for informing about practitioners' roles in promoting equity (Blaise, 2005).

3.1.4 Men as ‘male role models’ for boys

In recent years, the discourses of hegemonic masculinity and heterosexuality that underpin concerns about boys’ underachievement and the ‘crisis of masculinity’ have led to governmental agendas that aim to increase numbers of male practitioners/teachers in early childhood and primary education, in line with the call for more gender-balanced workforce in educational sectors in countries such as England/UK, China, Germany and Norway (Brownhill, 2014; Rohrmann & Emilsen, 2015; Peeters, et al., 2015; Warin, 2017; Yang & McNairb, 2017). Some Chinese provincial governments in the more economically developed east coast areas have announced policies to provide boys who choose to study ECEC subjects with free tertiary education (Jiangsu Education, 2014; MENTEACH, 2015; Xu & Waniganayake, 2017), and countries like the UK have implemented a number of projects in an effort to close gender gaps between boys’ and girls’ attainment (Carrington et al., 2007; Brownhill, 2014). Informed by socialization and developmental psychological theories of gender binaries, it is believed that men are needed to ‘teach’ boys about being masculine and to provide boys with a ‘boy-friendly’ school environment. Such perspectives have been popular in the sense of a ‘male role model’ discourse that is aligned with the above described discourses concerning how children are understood to become gendered human beings. However, research has consistently shown that ‘male role models’ are indefinite concepts according to male practitioner’s self-reflections (Robb, 2000; Brownhill, 2014 & 2015). This, again, reflects the inability of traditional gender discourses in explaining and understanding gender complexity. Indeed, the involvement of male practitioners is a more complex issue, which I will illustrate further in this current chapter and throughout this research. What I want to address here is that, the preference for male practitioners/teachers in early childhood and primary education is another form of policing hegemonic masculinity ever since childhood (Connell, 2005). Although we may still welcome men to become practitioners and to work with young children, scholars have questioned the notion that men are not wanted to re-enhance the gender stereotypes about boys’ and girls’ differences in schools (see for example, Peeters et al., 2015; Warin, 2017; Yang & McNairb, 2017).

To summarize here, treating children differently according to biological sex and attached gender roles not only limits their potential, but also presents inequalities

between girls and boys and between those who cross the boundaries of dominant gender norms. I would agree with Francis' (2012) arguments that whilst all individuals present (to a varying extent) gender heteroglossic performances within the dominant gender monoglossic system, gender monoglossia is nevertheless inescapable: at individual level boys and girls cannot avoid being categorized into the two sides of gender binaries in most societies. It is vital though to challenge such monoglossia by focusing on the ways in which children's gender experiences are not only constrained by, but also manifest beyond, sexed bodies. Therefore, unlike traditional gender discourses that simply define boys and girls into different beings, poststructuralism enquires into how children construct their gendered subjectivities with reference to prescribed gender discourses and how practitioners can participate (partially if not completely) in children's gendered lives for the purpose of enhancing children's wellbeing.

3.2 Shifting to the poststructuralist approach in gender and education

According to Alloway (1995) and Blaise (2005), poststructuralism can be used to describe the mechanisms of power and how meaning and power are organized, enacted, and opposed in our society including in early childhood settings. When practitioners understand children's gender development according to socialization and/or developmental psychological perspectives, they are actually policing and reinforcing the power of dominant gender discourses. Nevertheless, as those discourses arguably disadvantage both girls and boys, practitioners need to ideally challenge them. We already know that the power of dominant gender discourses is often masked and thus taken for granted by individuals (Foucault, 1980; Butler, 1990 & 2004; MacNaughton, 2005), hence to challenge dominant gender discourses in early childhood classrooms means to unmask the 'mystery' of their power in the first place. In applying Foucault's (1980) theory of power to educational research, Blaise (2005) and Francis (2006) explain that power is relational and no one absolutely 'owns' it. Instead, any individual can be both powerful and powerless according to various situations (Sauntson, 2012). In the early childhood educational context, both practitioners and children, whatever their gender, are considered to be practicing power in their daily interactions with each other (Thorne, 1993; Browne, 2004). But there is a seemingly unequal distribution of power within the regime of traditional gender discourses. For instance, the dichotomous discourse tends to regard childhood as a less complete stage of life

compared to adulthood, placing adults (practitioners) in a more powerful position towards children (Thorne, 1993; Paechter, 2017); the discourse of hegemonic masculinity privileges some boys more than other boys and girls, enabling the former a much higher degree of power in relation to their peers. Through those power relations, children learn about social structures and expectations and construct their subjectivities accordingly.

3.2.1 Children's social constructions of gender in early childhood classrooms

In constructing their subjectivities, children actively respond to the social world surrounding them. In the case of gender subjectivities, children on the one hand know that there are certain, desirable, and 'normal' ways of being a girl or a boy; and on the other hand, they are also aware of the contradictions and ambiguities that gender embeds in their daily life (Blaise, 2005). Research also shows that children not only maintain gender norms, but also resist and subvert them (ibid). Early childhood researchers such as Thorne (1993), Blaise (2005) and Estola (2011) use the word "play" to provide a metaphor for the ways in which children actively construct their gender subjectivities within the constraint of gender discourses and beyond (Sauntson, 2012). The word 'play' suggests that the social construction of gender is an active and ongoing process within which children perform their gender according to different situations for pleasure and fun (Thorne, 1993; MacNaughton, 2006; Estola, 2011). This process is salient in all kinds of activities that children participate in early childhood classrooms. There are rich examples in empirical research that find girls enjoying playing with dolls and conducting activities that are shaped by dominant gender discourses (like looking after babies, washing, etc.) as well as boys who are excited about sports and other traditionally 'masculine' activities, because they know that these behaviours could gain them recognition from their peers and adults (Blaise, 2005; Jacobson, 2011). At the same time, there are also instances where both girls and boys are having fun playing across gender borders, negotiating and challenging dominant gender discourses (Thorne, 1993; Estola, 2011). Boys may join the girls in playing in the 'house corner' and even play a role of 'caring', and girls might be found doing 'rough and tumble' play as is often expected from boys. Therefore, although in most cases children's play may be shaped by various gender discourses that are powerfully organized in early childhood classrooms and in wider society, those discourses are also in turn shaped by children's active 'play' with gender (Blaise,

2005). Through such processes, possibilities for change of gender norms may emerge (Thorne, 1993; Iorio & Visweswaraiah, 2011).

3.2.2 Children 'doing' gender

Children's 'play' with gender is also reflected in the forms of gender performance that I have described in *Chapter 2*. I explained there that individuals' gender performativity is situational according to various circumstances (Connell & Pearse, 2015), and could include doing and undoing gender as a social structure (Butler, 2004). Research has shown that in most cases children 'do' gender and organize their daily activities upon dominant gender norms (Thorne, 1993; Browne, 2004; Blaise, 2005; Sauntson, 2012). In both Thorne's (1993) and Browne's (2004) empirical studies on children's experiences with gender, for example, they noticed that boys and girls largely play in separate groups with stereotypically gendered activities - the so called 'boys' games and girls' games'. Interestingly, girls and boys in Browne's (2004) research reflected little about parental or explicit peer group pressure on their gender-based pattern of interactions, but rather were attributed more to their different interests as boys or girls. Thorne's (1993) explanations on gender separations between boys and girls agrees with Browne's (2004) findings, too. It can be interpreted here that children are 'doing' gender through their own agency or 'will', although this will is often unavoidably constructed in alliance with dominant gender discourses. And sometimes children also 'do' gender in non-traditional ways. I already illustrated in my last paragraph that children may occasionally cross gender boundaries for pleasure and fun. But they do not cross freely - instead, crossing gender boundaries is not without expense, and is closely bonded with the power of dominant gender structures.

We may hear about boys and girls being labelled as 'sissies' and 'tomboys' among peer cultures (Thorne, 1993; Reay, 2001; Paechter, 2010). Such labels are usually associated with children who display characteristics and behaviours of their opposite gender being excluded from their same-sex peer groups, getting teased at and/or bullied by children of both sexes, and receiving forms of concern from the adult world (Sauntson, 2012). To what extent children might be impacted by those labels is influenced by their individual agency that is constructed through their personal experiences. For instance, Paechter (2010) found out in her study that girls tended to construct the 'tomboy' and the 'girly-girl' as oppositional

identities. Albeit the oppositional constructions limit those girls' gender flexibilities, they were still regarded as able to switch between tomboy and girly-girl identities situationally. However, in general children often suffer as a result of performances of gender 'deviance' (Browne, 2004). This is because the power of hegemonic masculinity and other dominant gender discourses would usually exclude and 'punish' individuals who 'do' gender beyond their constraints. Nevertheless, such powerfulness sometimes could also be taken advantage of by children who want to 'do' gender at their own willingness - as Francis (2012) summarizes, 'particular, totemic, motifs from the gender matrix may be used by subjects to project monoglossia, and to mask the actual transgressive heteroglossia of their gender performances' (p.11). For example, in Thorne's (1993) book, she described a boy who is popular among boys because of his strong masculine character as revealed in sports and others, and who may occasionally join the girls in doing something that would be considered as 'girly'. But his border-crossing does not seem to be found problematic and is even admired by other boys for being 'funny'. By lending his power gained from his masculine gender performance to the freedom of crossing gender boundaries, the boy enjoyed 'doing' gender for pleasure and fun. Hence indeed, 'doing' gender can be both pleasurable and unpleasant (Boldt, 2011). Children are aware of this and can actively respond to it under a variety of circumstances.

3.2.3 Gender relations between boys and girls

An individual child also 'performs' gender relationally in their interactions and relations with others. As gender is a relational concept - being a girl is related to and defined by girls' relations with boys, and vice versa (MacNaughton, 2006) - children in their school life normally construct their gender subjectivities in relation to their peers. Many studies such as Thorne's (1993) and Browne's (2004) have shown that in most cases boys and girls divide themselves into oppositional groups that share different interests and play separately (ibids). By referring to their same-gender peers and by distancing themselves from the opposite gender, children gain their respective senses of being a boy or a girl. Such gendered relationships form the often separate and often rivalrous peer cultures of boys and girls, and children from the opposite gender are usually excluded from each culture (Boldt, 2011). In some situations boys' and girls' cultures may overlap, and it is usually in those situations that fighting against each other becomes obvious.

To illustrate, Thorne (1993) observed that both girls and boys are interested in chasing games and although same-sex chasing is much more common, ‘boys-chase-girls’ and ‘girls-chase-boys’ usually attract more discussions and excitement among both girls and boys (Connell & Pearse, 2015). Boys’ and girls’ gender relations also demonstrate heterosexuality in some occasions (Renold, 2000; 2003; & 2006; Holford, Renold, & Huuki, 2013; Huuki & Renold, 2016). In her earlier works, Renold (2000; 2003; & 2006) has reported extensively on her findings about primary-school boys’ and girls’ active engagement with and productions of ‘romantic’ and ‘hetero/sexual’ relationships in England, emphasizing that children’s gender subjectivities and relations are largely shaped by a ‘compulsory heterosexuality’ (Rich, 1980) discourse. More recently, Renold and her colleagues (Holford et al., 2013; Huuki & Renold, 2016) argue that children as young as 5 or 6 years old in the UK and Finland are doing, being and becoming ‘sexual’ through kisses and ‘crushes’ in their play activities. The divergence of gender relations between boys and girls that reflect dominant gender discourses of gender binarism is outside the scope of this study, but I wish to point here to the importance of understanding children’s gender relations for practitioners’ practices, which follow in the coming chapter.

More importantly, power, again, is central to gender relations among boys and girls and such relations often lead to inequalities. Boys and girls are usually forced to stay within their respective peer cultures and any attempt to cross will get punished by their peers and/or defended by the opposite groups (Boldt, 2011). Due to hegemonic gender discourses, on the one hand cross-border boys are usually deemed to be more problematic than cross-border girls (ibid) and on the other hand, it is the boys who are often privileged in the ‘battle’ between boys and girls (Thorne, 1993). For example, the traditional rough-and-tumble version of chasing and other outdoor activities endorses boys control of the ‘space’ of the playground in relation to girls, and boys are more often found disrupting girls’ activities than the other way around (Connell & Pearse, 2015). The heterosexual discourse results more in boys making fun of girls towards their appearance, as well as in boys excluding and bullying other marginalised boys who fail to display traditional masculinity (Skelton, 2006; Ringrose & Renold, 2010). Power relations are salient in almost every corner of children’s everyday activities, both within boys’ and girls’ separate gender cultures and between them.

3.2.4 Gender intersections in ECEC

Gender is not of course, however, the only aspect that results in unequal relations among children. Estola (2011) argues that each child's life is connected to many historical, societal, and cultural factors that situate the child, such as gender, ethnicity, language, and social class. Each of these factors is itself as complicated as gender in influencing children's social experiences and constructions of subjectivities, and a lengthy discussion of these is beyond the scope of this current work. However, as I have already said in *Chapter 2*, gender usually intersects with other factors in children's constructions of their subjectivities, and adds further complexities to children's various experiences in schools and the wider society. For example, there are an increasing number of studies that focus on the ways in which gender and 'race'⁴ are interrelated, resulting in certain children's experiences of exclusion (Fergus, Noguera & Martin, 2014; Ispa-Landa, 2013; Morris & Perry, 2017). In her study on male and female black adolescents' experiences of moving from urban to suburban schools in the US, Ispa-Landa (2013) found that girls were more likely to be excluded by their school mates due to being stereotyped as 'ghetto' and 'loud'. Such stereotypes, as Ispa-Landa (2013) noted, could be attributed to both racialization and gendering. There are also studies that look at how girls' education is strongly connected to their socio-economic background (for example, Walkerdine, Lucey, & Melody, 2001; Reay, 2015). Middle-class girls in England seem to achieve effortlessly in academic studies and employment in comparison to working class girls - as a result of the interplay of differential economic, social and cultural capitals (Walkerdine et al., 2001). Another more recent study by Reay (2015) nevertheless notes that the middle-class learning dispositions of English girls came at the expense of teasing/bullying by peers. Last but not least, age seems to be a very important factor that influences children's gender subjectivities and relations.

Children's gender experiences may differ at different ages as consequences of their (re)productions of gender discourses in different school contexts and in relation to different social expectations placed accordingly to their ages (Thorne, 1993; Renold & Ringrose, 2011). For example, researchers have found that gender

⁴ In common with many writers on the topic, I use the term in inverted commas to emphasise the social construction of the category.

separation between boys and girls tends to be more and more obvious as they grow older; and when children enter secondary school and adolescence, they may have formed well-established gender cultures (Thorne, 1993; Davison & Frank, 2006). Thorne (1993) also found that age separation and gender separation usually enhance each other, for reasons such as same-age homogeneity and romantic teasing. Children in same-gender groups also tended to be near-age; and as age grows, boys and girls are more likely to be teased if they choose to be in a group of the opposite gender - thus enhancing gender segregation. Themes of gender subjectivities and relations may vary as our sexualized bodies change alongside our age, too. These may include girls caring more and more about their 'attractiveness' and boys becoming increasingly interested in bodily strength in the contexts of heterosexualised discourses of 'ideal' masculine and feminine embodiment (Renold, 2000; Reay, 2001; Read, 2011; Read, Francis, & Skelton, 2011). Sexualized conversations and heterosexual relationships, although found to be evident (at least) from the age of 5 (Renold, 2000; 2003; & 2006; Holford et al., 2013; Huuki & Renold, 2016), might become more popular among boys and girls as they become increasingly knowledgeable and agentic subjects in 'sexualisation' (Renold & Ringrose, 2011). However, I need to address in advance here that as this research only studies gender in ECEC contexts, in which children are usually aged younger and possibly less overtly knowledgeable about or agentic in 'sexualized' discourses in relation to their subjectivity constructions than older children, the gender-age intersections may not be expected as distinct as those reported in studies in primary or secondary schools.

3.2.5 Gender, culture, and education

So far, I have elucidated the main perspectives of how poststructuralist approaches to gender can be applied to educational contexts for the sake of children's full potential and wellbeing. And the power of dominant gender discourses is at the core of shaping children's gender subjectivities and relations in school. At the same time, however, we also need to state that gender discourses may change and power may shift from one discourse to another through time and space. Gender discourses are located via cultural representations and may vary from one culture to another (Nanda, 2000). Educational settings are social institutions that reflect and reinforce dominant cultural discourses prevalent in their societies (Alexander, 2000; Tobin et al., 2009), and more importantly, they

are actually major sites of the reproduction and legitimation of such discourses from generation to generation (Tobin et al., 2009). These cultural discourses are also challenged or subverted through education, too. Therefore, when investigating gender in education, we need to take into account culturally-specific discourses that influence and constrain gender understandings and educational policies and practice (Phillips & Schweisfurth, 2014). In addition, in the contexts of globalisation and contemporary exchanges between cultures, we would expect to see both overlaps and influences within and between different cultural contexts and again, education appears to be a vital institution that facilitates the internationalisation of cultures and global communities (Connell, 2006). Global conventions and strategies such as the UNCRC and the SDGs would also challenge local inequalities and/or stereotypes. By being culturally reflective and through comparisons between three cultures as reflected within ECEC settings, this research intends to make a contribution to our understandings of the ways in which gender is relevant to culturally-specific education and development (for example, Fong [2002] indicated that China's abolished one-child policy⁵ empowered urban daughters with unprecedented parental support in their education and care; in Madagascar, the combination of poverty and traditional gender roles has found to be determining unequal school access among young people from semi-nomadic fishing communities - with young boys go fishing with their fathers and brothers whilst young girls work at home, and both genders being marginalised [Moreira, Rabenevanana, & Picard, 2017]), to challenge dominant gender discourses locally and internationally, and to promote globally recognized social justice and equity.

All in all, gender, as has been consistently addressed in this study, is more complicated than any simplistic binary discourse of 'the girls versus the boys' could suggest (Reay, 2001). It is also not merely about how children embody gender in accordance with biological conceptions of 'sex', or only about how they perform gender within and beyond gender structures; it is about how children actively 'play' with gender and participate in various gender relations, and deal with gender as one of the many human issues they would encounter in their life (Blaise, 2005; Read et al., 2011; Francis et al., 2012; Connell & Pearse, 2015). As

⁵ From 2015, one-child policy in China is replaced by a two-child policy.

Thorne (1993) claims, '[c]hildren's [gender] interactions are not preparations for life; they are life itself' (p.3).

3.3 Summary

In summary, this chapter has contested some of the dominant discourses in ECEC and the wider educational contexts that frame gender differences between boys and girls. It is argued that sex-role socialization theory and developmental psychological studies upon which early childhood pedagogies draw, could potentially limit children's wellbeing in their early childhood and beyond. Binary and hegemonic discourses that underpin those theories further lead to gender inequalities in both boys' and girls' school experiences. Poststructuralist views of children and education, as have been depicted in this chapter, thus refer to the necessity of understanding the power of those dominant gender discourses. Through manifesting, navigating, reproducing, negotiating and challenging the power of dominant gender discourses in a variety of complicated ways, children are actively constructing their gender subjectivities that are situated within their specific schools, families, and societies. Educational institutions are regarded as important venues where social changes could take place in terms of shifting traditional discourses and promoting social justice and equity (Thorne, 1993; Browne, 2004; Blaise, 2005). As a consequence, contemporary ECEC now sees a shift in terms of the early childhood practitioner's role from 'a desire to meet each individual child's unique and individual needs to attending to larger issues of fairness and social justice' (Blaise, 2005: p.3). This includes helping children challenge gender stereotypes that diminish children's opportunities to develop their full potential, encouraging children to mutually respect each other's differences and diversities, and all in all, providing all children regardless of their gender and other social classifications, with equal and inclusive ECEC. Therefore, the next chapter will review literature that explores to what extent practitioners' gender subjectivities may influence their practices in ECEC and in what capacity would practitioners be able to tackle any possible tensions between their own gender subjectivities and discourses of gender-sensitive pedagogy (Warin, 2017).

Chapter 4 Does practitioners' gender matter? Gender in ECEC workforce

Poststructuralist educators and researchers have suggested that children's gender subjectivities are always seen as incomplete and constructed through a discursive process of struggle and contestation in school classrooms (Sauntson, 2012). Therefore, as adults who take the main responsibility of organizing the classrooms and who are actually part of children's everyday life in schools, practitioners have a lot of power to make a difference in children's constructions of gender subjectivities and relations (Estola, 2011; Iorio & Visweswaraiah, 2011). Room arrangement, daily schedule, classroom management and discipline techniques, teaching methods, observations, evaluations, and assessments carried out by practitioners, can all have gender-related impacts on what happens to boys and girls in classrooms (Hinitz & Hewes, 2011). In pointing out that girls and boys mostly play in separate groups, Thorne (1993) added that adult presence tends to undermine gender separation as they utilize their power and organize activities that involve both genders. Practitioners can also add to children's comprehension of gender and widen their experiences of gender roles through their conversations and interactions with children (Estola, 2011; Iorio & Visweswaraiah, 2011; Strasser & Koepfel, 2011). For instance, practitioners may intentionally break gender stereotypical boundaries by hugging (man) or playing ice hockey (woman) with children (Estola, 2011), or providing children with knowledge and experiences that challenge gender stereotypes (stereotypes such as that daddies do not wear lipsticks, that girls go to the hairdresser and boys go to the barber, etc.) that children pick up in their social life (Iorio & Visweswaraiah, 2011). Boys and girls in turn also rely on practitioners' authority and power to help them feel safer and fairly treated in gender relations, for example by setting up explicit rules (MacNaughton, 2006).

Indeed, various examples demonstrate how practitioners can help to deemphasize gender stereotypes by being conscious of the many small, subtle things we do on a daily basis (Strasser & Koepfel, 2011), how practitioners can organize the classrooms, allocate classroom resources, and use language to promote gender equity (*ibid*), and many more approaches that promote diversity and respect among children about all kinds of differences (Iorio & Visweswaraiah, 2011). But can all practitioners become gender-sensitive educators and provide children with

equitable and divergent school environments as poststructuralists would have expected? We are undoubtedly hoping so in theory. Nevertheless, in practice all practitioners are connected with their own gender subjectivities and experiences that are constructed since their childhoods (Jacobson, 2011) and within wider cultural expectations.

Taking into account practitioners' vital roles in positive interventions in children's complex gender constructions and relations, this chapter will continue on to investigate whether practitioners' own gender experiences would matter when providing children with various aspects of early childhood education and care and in particular, aspects that are related to children's constructions of gender subjectivities. Research has recognized that practitioners' personal feelings and life experiences are highly relevant in their interactions with children, and gender subjectivity is at the core of shaping practitioners' self that embraces their beliefs, values, preferences, and attitudes (Jacobson, 2003; 2008; & 2011). All these will be linked with whether practitioners could offer children 'numerous, different opinions about how they [children] think about and understand gender [subjectivity] and the choice to change their world view' (Jacobson, 2011, p.11). More importantly, most practitioners are indeed products of similar social and educational forces as contemporary children, in which they have constructed their selves in line with dominant educational and gender discourses (Davison & Frank, 2006; Estola, 2011). Owing to the power of those discourses, practitioners would often consciously and/or unconsciously navigate their teaching practices and daily interactions with children based upon such discourses (Estola, 2011; Strasser and Koeppel, 2011). Practitioners may be observed to interact more with boys than girls, or to have different expectations of girls and boys (Boldt, 2011; Strasser & Koeppel, 2011). They are also likely to perpetuate inequalities through pedagogy and any aspect of classroom organization in a way that embeds 'naturalized' and 'common-sense' differences between women and men (Davison & Frank, 2006).

In order to prevent practitioners' own gender-based, stereotype-based behaviours toward children, scholars have suggested that practitioners need to look at themselves as practitioners with as much honesty as they can muster (Boldt, 2011) and to be aware of and reflect on their subjectivities as embraced in their practices with children (Jacobson, 2011). But perhaps there is even more. Iorio

and Visweswaraiah (2011) pointed out that practitioners' personal education and experiences can be limited while struggling to present children with different ideas and experiences about gender (and the social world). Although Iorio and Visweswaraiah (2011) further claimed that practitioners can expand into research and writing that offers wider insights, I would also add the variety of practitioner groups as another way of expanding children's experiences in schools. Since ECEC has long been a gendered profession that employs mostly women, it is likely that the experiences that children would have in ECEC classrooms are consequently limited in terms of gender diversities. To set up a 'background' context for addressing gender diversity in the current study, this chapter will first of all elaborate on how ECEC becomes a gender-imbalanced profession. It then unfolds the currently topical debates on encouraging men working in ECEC. Subsequently, the chapter will go through literature that explores whether or not and how female and male practitioners posit and perform themselves as both gendered individuals and professionals in ECEC. A summary will lastly be given in this chapter to point to the importance of researching about gender and ECEC in an interactional way that includes both children's and practitioners' gender subjectivities and performances.

4.1 ECEC as a gendered workforce

As the figures provided previously in the Introduction of this dissertation indicate, the vast majority number of staff members working in the ECEC workforce are women across global contexts. Although variations in international ECEC systems are significant, a common feature of the so-believed 'feminisation' of ECEC is noted (Laere et al., 2014) and may be related to a shared pattern of social and historical constructions.

4.1.1 Women, society, and ECEC

ECEC is historically built upon care and education separately or jointly in its traditions (Laere et al., 2014; Peeters et al., 2015). Both 'care' and 'education' are controversial conceptualisations in the development of ECEC, at least in Western societies if not throughout the world. According to Laere et al. (2014), the 'caring' version of ECEC was originated from an extension of domestic mothering that is culturally considered to be women's job as derived from their 'naturalness'. Because in traditional gender discourses essentialist female

characters are regarded as less valuable than male gender characters, the ‘caring’ job done by women as a profession is as well devalued (King, 1998; Coffey & Delamont, 2000; Drudy, Martin, Woods, & O’Flynn, 2005; Riddell & Tett, 2006; Peeters et al., 2015). The low social status of the ‘caring’ profession is further enhanced by the classed issue that early child care services were provided mainly for working class children whose parents were at work, and that carers were traditionally recruited from women of the ‘lower’ classes (Osgood, 2005; Osgood et al., 2006; Laere et al., 2014). Usually accompanied by low pay scales and limited promotion spaces, ECEC being a ‘caring’ profession has long been socially and economically disadvantaged even until nowadays in some (if not all) parts of the world (Peeters, 2007; Laere et al., 2014; Peeters et al., 2015; Yang & McNair, 2017).

The strong influence of neuroscience and economic science conceptualizes the early years as ‘the best preparation for academic achievements in later years as well as for a thriving labour market’ (Peeters et al., 2015, p.308) - alluding to what Foucault (1980) argued as the power of certain ‘metanarratives’ such as science to legitimize themselves as ‘fact’ or ‘truth’. Labelled as the ‘schoolification/academization’ of ECEC, it seems that the promotion of educational purposes in ECEC has resulted in a higher social esteem towards the profession (Laere et al., 2014; Peeters et al., 2015). Nonetheless, in realizing that ECEC remains a career that is largely occupied by women despite its development of higher qualifications and better salaries consequently, researchers start to criticize the ‘masculine’ notions of education as reflected in the ECEC workforce.

There seems to be a hierarchy between education and care in ECEC, which is a combined consequence of mind-body dualism and gender binarism in our societies (Laere et al., 2014; Warin, 2014; Peeters et al., 2015). ‘Caring’ work is considered to be instrumentalised for educational activities, and children’s physical, emotional and social needs are often sacrificed for the educational agenda that attends only to children’s development of ‘knowledge’ (Laere et al., 2014; Warin, 2014). But notwithstanding those distinctions between care and education, caring jobs are still part of ECEC practitioners’ responsibilities that are devalued and ‘contemptible’ in and outside ECEC profession (King, 1998; Dill, Price-Glynn, & Rakovski, 2016). Even though current international (OECD, 2017b) and national

policies in Scotland, Hong Kong, and Mainland China (The Curriculum Development Council, 2006; Ministry of Education of the PRC, 2012; Scottish Government, 2014) have all addressed in ECEC curricula the importance of children's health and well-being, social and emotional needs, and other elements traditionally regarded more as 'care' (see *Chapter 6, Section 6.2* for more detailed discussions on ECEC policies and contexts in the three cultures), it remains critical to what extent the division of care and education in ECEC will be challenged in the three research contexts and beyond.

Indeed, the division of care and education in ECEC demonstrates narrow views on both care and education, and is at the risk of failing to provide children with coherent and comprehensive ECEC services (Larer et al., 2014; Warin, 2014). In response to it, a holistic approach to ECEC is proposed and celebrated by ECEC transformers (Warin, 2014). Termed as 'educare', Warin (2014) praised that this approach can expand ECEC into a broader sense of educational goals that integrate social, emotional, and cognitive aspects of learning, as well as attribute an educational value to care. In so doing, to what extent the conceptualisation of 'educare' could challenge the entrenched traditions of care and education in ECEC, and subsequently lead ECEC to a gender-balanced profession that is attractive to both men and women, is to be investigated.

4.1.2 Encouraging men to ECEC

The call for more men to work in ECEC workforce has indeed been visible among public, academic, and political appeals for decades, mostly in Western countries such as Australia, Belgium and England (Mills et al., 2004; Peeters, 2007; Roberts-Holmes & Brownhill, 2011; Brownhill, 2015). It is assumed that ECEC being a 'feminized' community is detrimental to boys' gender development and wellbeing in a sense that there is a lack of male role models for boys (especially for those who lack a father figure at home) to learn about being a 'man' (Skelton, 2002; 2003; & 2012; Carrington & McPhee, 2008; Francis, 2008; Francis et al., 2008; Chan, 2011; Tennhoff, Nentwich, & Vogot, 2015). It is expected also that an increased male participation could lead to higher social status of ECEC by adding 'masculine' values to the profession (Sumsion, 2000 & 2005; Ho & Lam, 2014). Such expectations, however, are often misplaced as they fall into the essentialist views of fixed gender differences that all men and all women will possess

respectively and could be socialized into, as well as reemphasize the unequitable gender discourses that privilege men in our societies.

The inappropriateness of referring to traditional gender discourses in attracting more men to ECEC is evident in the little progress of male participation in ECEC in many European countries despite governmental endeavours to take initiatives to increase male numbers (Rohrmann & Emilsen, 2015; Peeters et al., 2015). With even low salaries of ECEC practitioners in some countries being improved, which are deemed to be major barriers in encouraging men to work in ECEC, the number of male ECEC practitioners employed in those countries are not as high as one would have expected (Peeters, 2013). The gender stigma that devalues care in ECEC as illustrated above is still holding back men's determinations to become ECEC practitioners (Warin, 2014; Peeters et al., 2015); and paradoxically, under the gender regime of hierarchies, when a man 'lowers' himself to work with young children, his motives may be suspected with regards to pedophilia and/or sexual abuse concerns (Skelton, 2003; Peeters et al., 2015; Tennhoff et al., 2015).

Whilst the scarcity of men in ECEC is not yet resolved after years of advocacy, there is also continuing questioning over whether we really need more men to work in ECEC (Warin, 2017). In arguing against the traditional gender hierarchies between men and women, scholars warn that having men working in ECEC has the danger of reproducing gender inequalities within the field and even beyond (Ashley, 2003; Sumsion, 2005; Tennhoff et al., 2015). The 'glass escalator' effect that men are more likely to get promoted to senior positions (Williams, 1992) is criticized in the ECEC workforce and Coffey and Delamont (2000) contend that, although ECEC (and the teaching profession) is 'feminized' in number, men are still in charge of the management and policies concerning it. As a matter of fact, the whole political agenda in many countries to have men joining ECEC implies a hegemonic masculine view that denigrates the value of female practitioners and femininity (Ashley, 2003; Francis et al., 2008; Tennhoff et al., 2015).

Nevertheless, despite the persistent power of dominant gender discourses in many countries that constantly shape ECEC as a gender-unequal profession with or without men's involvement (like in China, where the appreciation of masculinity is a powerful gender discourse - see *Chapter 6* for detailed explanations),

challenges to the 'gender regime' of ECEC (Peeters et al., 2015) are not impossible and men's participation in ECEC is still deemed to have the potential to 'transform gender relations and subvert entrenched patriarchal gender regimes' (Warin, 2014, p.93). The rising status of care in ECEC in countries such as Norway (Warin, 2014) and the cultural shift of admiring fathers' roles in their children's caring in Belgium, England, America and elsewhere (Roberts-Holmes, 2009; Laere et al., 2014; Livingston, 2014) are such indications that suggest changes of social attitudes towards traditional gender structures, although some would argue that socio-economic factors will have significant impacts on the acceptance and practicality of increased fathering (Hauari & Hollingworth, 2009; Johansson, 2011). For example, in the United States, there were approximately 2 million stay-at-home dads, nearly doubling the number in 1989 (although the proportion remains low for fathers as stay-at-home parents - raising from 10% in 1898 to 16% in 2012) (Livingston, 2014). It is hoped that men's participation in ECEC could help boost those social changes for a gender-equitable and -inclusive ECEC and society, but not through embracing their 'hegemonic masculinity' as men. Instead, men together with women ECEC practitioners, are both expected to demonstrate to the children ways of being a man or a woman, or more appropriately being individuals, that can go beyond existing gender norms and structures, and to provide children with an equitable, diversified, inclusive, and respectful ECEC.

4.2 Gender and professionalism in ECEC: practitioners' embodied subjectivities

To achieve the goal of gender equality in ECEC and subsequently in our societies, Rohrmann and Emilsen (2015) proposed that on an individual level it is significant to understand the impact of adults' gender on children's development and wellbeing, and as well on the welfare of staff members. On an organizational level, Rohrmann and Emilsen (2015) also think it is essential to understand how gender imbalance among the staff affects power relations and everyday practices in ECEC institutions. I have already depicted at the start of this chapter that, practitioners' interventions can have positive or negative impacts on children's gender constructions and relations, bearing in mind the complexities of children's gender experiences and subjectivities. Actually, such interventions can be further complicated by practitioners' own gender subjectivities, particularly when adult men are included in the traditionally 'feminized' communities.

In recent years, a political agenda towards the ‘professionalization’ of ECEC has been widely advocated in many countries including the UK, Belgium, and Italy (Osgood, 2006; Moss & Dahlberg, 2008; Peeters, 2013; Laere et al., 2014; Taggart, 2015; Caruso & Sorzio, 2015), in order for practitioners to receive professional, standardised trainings that can lead to raise of quality in ECEC provision. The UNESCO’s 2017/18 Global Education Monitoring Report further indicates a global intention to achieve quality education through universalising and standardising teacher education across educational sectors - making teachers’/practitioners’ professional quality comparable across countries (UNESCO, 2017). Combined with the ‘schoolification’ previously illustrated in this chapter, it is desired in this discourse that ECEC practitioners should be ‘professionalized’ into professional bodies that employ a ‘techo-managerial exercise in control and normalisation’ (Fielding & Moss, 2011, p.38). Through such ways of ‘professionalisation’, it is believed that ECEC will enjoy higher social status, better working conditions, and consequently, attracting more men for a gender-balanced workforce (Laere et al., 2014). In turn, men are expected to enhance the professional status of ECEC by bringing into the field a ‘masculine’ version of schooling (Tennhoff et al., 2015). But with little progress in attracting men to work in ECEC and with the division between education and care being challenged, professionalism in ECEC is being consistently questioned for depriving practitioners’ personal emotions that are unavoidable when caring and teaching for young children (Moyles, 2001; Osgood, 2010; Laere et al., 2014; Warin, 2014; Taggart, 2015). ECEC workforce is argued to be emotional labour, and practitioners’ own selves is a resource in providing young children with educational and caring provisions (Campbell-Barr & Georgeson, 2015; Taggart, 2015). Indeed, the conceptualisation of ‘professionalism’ in ECEC as illustrated in political terms, again, falls into the dichotomous thinking patterns that prioritise mind over body, rationality over emotionality, education over care, and men over women. All these aspects are interrelated in resulting in the gender imbalance and inequalities in ECEC, and professionalism defined by them thus needs to be reconceptualised.

Osgood (2006 & 2010) argues that professionalism in ECEC is socially constructed, and that each individual practitioner’s professional subjectivities are mutual consequences of social structures and personal agency. Laere and others (2014)

further stress that professionalism, in the same way as gender, entails practitioners' embodied subjectivities and experiences that are specific to every practitioner's entire social world. Therefore, it can be deduced that the influences of practitioners' interventions on children's gender development and wellbeing relate to more than practitioners' outwardly perceived gender; but rather are dependent on practitioners' embodied gender and professional subjectivities and social experiences. Before this research moves on to find out how practitioners' subjectivities can impact on children's development and wellbeing, I will elaborate on the complexities and divergences of those subjectivities drawing from existing literature. Whether and to what extent there may be any shared patterns in the constructions of male and female practitioners' subjectivities respectively, as well as the cultural variations that shape practitioners' subjectivities from different parts of the world, are to be touched upon.

Summarized from recent literature, studies that report male and female practitioners' self-reflected and/or observed subjectivities concerning their work in the ECEC and the broader teaching sectors, as of particular relevance to this research, include the following main aspects:

4.2.1 The interrelations between practitioners' gender and professional subjectivities

In recognizing that practitioners' attitudes towards the many aspects of their jobs as ECEC practitioners are of key importance with regards to their daily practices in the workforce and ultimately to children's interests and wellbeing, there is a growing interest among educationalists in investigating practitioners' professional self-/identities in ECEC (Dalli, 2008; Georgeson & Campbell-Barr, 2015). Especially, the professional identities of male ECEC practitioners have drawn significant research attention due to recent years' increased debates on men's participation in ECEC. On the one hand, the relatively rich amount of empirical studies that present men's life experiences and narratives working in ECEC could provide useful insight into the issue of gender imbalance in the field; on the other hand, however, it needs to be cautioned that female ECEC practitioners' views about their life experiences working in ECEC, as well as their views on gender imbalance in ECEC, are under-heard despite their numerically dominant presence (Mallozzi

& Galman, 2014; Xu & Waniganayake, 2017). As I discussed in *Chapter 2*, gender is a relational concept that needs to be understood as a ‘heterosexual matrix’ (Butler, 1990). Therefore, to be able to fully enquire about gender imbalance in ECEC, both male and female practitioners’ perspectives need to be included. Hence I am here reviewing some of the recent studies that either address both male and female practitioners’ opinions, or explore male and female practitioners’ professional attitudes separately, to inform about the relevance of practitioners’ gender and their professional subjectivities.

Both commonalities and differences between male and female practitioners’ subjective positioning towards their jobs are reported by a variety of studies. Bearing in mind that different methodologies and theoretical positions could have led to different findings by researchers (Rohrmann & Brody, 2015; Rohrmann & Emilsen, 2015), it seems particularly sensitive to draw upon the various gender-related discourses that co-exist in our societies and shape the commonalities as well as differences in practitioners’ professional subjectivities of both gender, in the interpretations of those superficially contradictory findings. A first discourse is the ethic of care, which includes a continuum of definitions that symbolise caring in ECEC from being exclusively feminine at one end to being inclusively harmonious at the other (Vogt, 2002). Consequently, some men practitioners would regard themselves (and also be considered by their female colleagues) as being incapable of and/or unsuitable for ‘caring’ in relation to its associations with femininity and mothering (Vogt, 2002; Petersen, 2014; Brody, 2015), and meanwhile gender differences may not be revealed when both men and women practitioners understand caring for example, as being committed, as developing relationships, and as focusing on meeting children’s needs (Vogt, 2002; Brody, 2015).

Second, the powerfully hegemonic discourses of professionalization and ‘schoolification/academicization’ that emphasize measurability, accountability and technical competence, tend to deprive practitioners of individualistic constructions of their work subjectivities (Carrington et al., 2007; Osgood, 2010). Both men and women practitioners were found to prioritize their professional skills that are necessary to work effectively with young children, including but not limited to, pedagogic and interpersonal skills; meanwhile, they are reported to

downplay the impacts of gender as to whether or not they could be a 'good' practitioner (Sak, Sahin, & Sahin, 2012; Nentwich, Poppen, Schalin, & Vogt, 2013; Brandes, Andrä, Röseler, & Andrich, 2015; Pirard, Schoenmaeckers, & Camus, 2015). At the same time, men were also observed to take advantage of hegemonic discourses and to refer to their unique contributions as men (Francis, et al., 2008; Nentwich et al., 2013; Brody, 2014). A good example of the paradoxical constructions of hegemonic discourses in terms of men and women practitioners' professional subjectivities can be reflected in discipline and classroom management. Read (2008) argued that a more 'disciplinarian' style (as opposed to a 'liberal' style) of classroom management was equally adopted by the majority of male and female teachers in her study with early primary teachers in England, and Sak and others (2012) also claimed that Turkish ECEC practitioners reflected no significant gender difference in terms of their beliefs about the usefulness of behavioural management (BM) strategies or how frequently they used such strategies. However, Sak and others (2012) further pointed out that male practitioners in their study revealed a slightly higher level of self-confidence in BM, which they argue is probably related to the discourse of a disciplinarian father figure in Turkish culture. This observation is supported by Francis and Skelton (2001), Francis (2008), Nentwich and others (2013), and Brody (2014), who also found that many men practitioners/teachers in their research in Europe, USA and Israel were inclined to stress the authority of being a man/father figure in their interactions with young children and especially boys.

A third discourse that practitioner participants in some studies would cite is the discourse of gender equity, which mainly lead to shared subjectivities between men and women practitioners (Riddell & Tett, 2006; Francis et al., 2008). According to Nentwich and her colleagues (2013), for instance, addressing the equal rights and importance of gender equality on a team is a major discursive practice some men ECEC practitioners in Switzerland use to cope with possible discrimination and the experience of exclusion. Such a strategy is also usually associated by an expectation that focuses on a diversity of individual attributes and personalities expected from practitioners regardless of their gender (McCormack & Brownhill, 2014).

Fourthly, the popular discourse among public and political perceptions in many cultures that pays strong attention to boys' underachievement and other 'gendered problems' in the 'feminized' schooling environments appears to embrace a significant influence on ECEC practitioners' gender understandings and professional practices in England and elsewhere (Skelton & Read, 2006; Skelton et al., 2009). There is an extensive amount of research in European countries that reveals male practitioners'/teachers' particular beliefs on themselves being a 'male role model' for children (especially boys) and bringing to the field of ECEC and primary education something different from female practitioners/teachers (for example, Francis, 2008; Brody, 2014; Hjalmarsson & Löfdahl, 2014; Brownhill, 2015). What is more, even Chinese female practitioners sometimes believe that men are different in their teaching styles and ways of interactions with children (Xu & Waniganayake, 2017). Consequently, Skelton and her colleagues (Skelton & Read, 2006; Skelton et al., 2009) indicated that some men and women primary school teachers would intentionally differentiate between boys and girls in their daily practices and interactions with children, according to gender stereotypes. For instance, some male primary school teachers in England reported that they would include more hands-on activities in their teaching, so that it is more suitable for boys who are believed to be kinaesthetic learners (Skelton et al., 2009). Scottish female early years practitioners reflected that they would treat boys and girls differently in accordance with their assumed 'biological' differences (Wingrave, 2016) - such that they tended to give children gender-stereotypical toys (e.g. construction castles for boys and ponies for girls).

Indeed, and last but not least, it is noted by numerous international studies that both men and women practitioners are involved in perpetuating dominant gender discourses in their interactions with young children, either consciously or unconsciously (Francis & Skelton, 2001; Skelton et al., 2009; Adriany & Warin, 2014; Brody, 2014; Mallozzi & Galman, 2014; Sandseter, 2014; Brandes et al., 2015; Xu & Waniganayake, 2017). It is not my attempt here to describe extensively those stereotypical gender subjectivities that ECEC practitioners may possess, but some examples of such subjectivities from literature are listed below:

Table 4-1 Examples of practitioners' gender stereotypical subjectivities

1. Male practitioners are more disciplinary and authoritative in their interactions with pupils [Europe, USA, Israel] (Francis & Skelton, 2001; Brody, 2014);
 2. Men are protectors, women and children are in need of protection [USA] (Mallozzi & Galman, 2014);
 3. Women are naturally mothering and caring [Indonesian] (Adriany & Warin, 2014);
 4. Boys are more active, boisterous, disobedient, and rough; girls are more attentive, confirming, gentle, and quite [Scotland] (Wingrave, 2016);
 5. Men are rational and women are emotional [China] (Xu & Waniganayake, 2017).
-

I will also use practitioners' attitudes towards risky play to further exemplify how gendered subjectivities are reflected in male and female practitioners' practices. In her study that investigated Norwegian ECEC practitioners' perceptions of children's risky play, Sandseter (2014) found that male practitioners have a more liberal attitude towards children's risky play, and allow children to engage in greater risky play than women. Even though a general acceptance of children's risky play among both male and female ECEC practitioners in Norway is inspiring in comparison with some other countries (ibid), the differences noted in this study conform to some extent to the traditional gender divisions of masculine and feminine attributes in Western society (Francis & Skelton, 2001). Such gendered attitudes were also evident in Brody's (2014 & 2015) research with men practitioners from six cultures (Switzerland, USA, the Netherlands, Israel, the UK, and Norway), who exhibited masculine constructions of daring and independence in their interactions with young children. A study conducted by myself and my colleague (Xu & Waniganayake, 2017) with male and female ECEC practitioners in China also suggested that the former held more positive attitudes towards children's risky play, whereas the latter tended to sacrifice children's opportunities of challenges and taking risks for their safety.

It thus can be concluded here that gender is not irrelevant to ECEC practitioners' professional subjectivities. The gender and professional understandings of individual practitioners are correlated in shaping their roles as an ECEC practitioner, mutually framing each other as situated in their specific discourses.

However, it is not simply an answer of general differences between male and female practitioners' professional subjectivities. Instead, it matters with regards to how male and female practitioners draw upon a variety of gender-related discourses in constructing their professional subjectivities. Research reviewed in this chapter demonstrates that practitioners may discursively construct their subjectivities with reference to various discourses that are either gender-stereotypical, gender-inclusive, or gender-blinded. The degree of commonality between and within genders regarding professional subjectivities (Skelton, 2003), will be the focus of the coming section. Due to the scarcity of research that presents about women practitioners' gender constructions, I am only able to discuss here men's unique ways of their gender constructions in a traditionally 'female profession'.

4.2.2 Men practitioners negotiating their gender and professional subjectivities working in ECEC

Although it is contested that female practitioners are rarely listened to concerning gender issues in ECEC, it seems that in many situations gender only paradoxically becomes salient when men practitioners are talked about in this field. The discourse of ECEC as a 'feminized profession' perhaps masks gender as not necessary to be considered (Moreau, Osgood, & Halsall, 2007), and only when men start to participate in this non-traditional occupation (Williams, 1989) do practitioners bring gender to their everyday topics more frequently than before (Mallozzi & Galman, 2014). It is therefore understandable to a limited degree why men practitioners are more often targeted by researchers to probe men's experiences working in ECEC, particularly how they negotiate their masculine subjectivities in a 'female profession'.

Estola (2011), Hjalmarsson and Löfdahl (2014), Nentwich and others (2013) supposed that men working in ECEC in Finland, Sweden and Switzerland usually encounter contradictory positions that on the one hand, they are expected to bring to the field 'masculine' traits that it is assumed that female practitioners do not possess; on the other hand, their masculinity seems to be contested either because they are also expected to participate in aspects of ECEC work that are considered to be traditionally female, or because they are often suspected as of being pedophile. In both ways men are regarded as 'others' who 'break into' a

non-traditional area due to their gender. At the same time, they are also found to be actively and discursively negotiating their 'otherness' when entering the field (King, 1998; Sumsion, 2000; Tennhoff et al., 2015). Nentwich and her colleagues (Nentwich et al., 2013; Tennhoff et al., 2015) summarized six strategies that men adopt to cope with their 'identity dissonance' (Warin, 2006) when working in ECEC in Switzerland, including three that emphasize gender differences, two that highlight gender sameness, and one that goes beyond gender binary. Namely, the three practices that men use to maintain their masculinity while working in a female-dominated profession are: 1. building the 'male niche' that draws a line between masculinity and femininity in terms of skills, tasks, and interests; 2. drawing on the subject position of the 'father' as a legitimate position within the family and hence an important relationship with children; and 3. referring to the ideal of 'the male breadwinner' through demonstration of ambitions towards senior positions in their career plans (Nentwich et al., 2013). To justify their motivations to choose a 'feminine' career and to declare their capabilities of doing such a job, the two measures that men utilize to propose their sameness with female practitioners consist of emphasizing gender equity and 'appropriating femininity' (ibid). The latter was described by Pullen and Simpson (2009) as men claiming some of the traditionally feminine interests, skills, or personal characteristics as part of their personal subjectivity, and in so doing, men are also deemed to be redefining masculinity/masculinities (Slay & Smith, 2011). A final way in which men ECEC practitioners deal with their 'identity dissonance' as claimed by Nentwich and others (2013) is to deemphasize gender in its relevance with ECEC work and to foreground professional training and skills.

Those six strategies that men ECEC practitioners use to construct their gender identities and to negotiate their 'otherness' are evident, to various extent and in diverse ways, among many studies conducted mainly in European countries (see for example, Francis & Skelton, 2001; Francis, 2008; Brody, 2014 & 2015; Brownhill, 2014). It can be noted that the strategies are well located in the various discourses that I analysed in the last section, which frame gender as paradoxically inclusive, exclusive, and insignificant in relation to the professional subjectivities of ECEC practitioners. Attributed to the power of these discourses, some shared patterns in the constructions of men (and perhaps women respectively) practitioners' professional subjectivities are considerable, and require critical thinking and

sophisticated challenges so as to appropriately address the issue of gender imbalance in ECEC. Simultaneously, the intra gender differences between men practitioners (and between women practitioners as well) (Skelton, 2003), are likewise notable.

While recognizing common practices and some uniformity in men ECEC practitioners' subjecthood, studies also noticed that there exists a diversity of differences among those men's attitudes towards their work in Europe, USA and Israel. They may choose ECEC as a career based on their multiple and individual experiences (Robb, 2000; Xu, 2012; Brody, 2014), and have varied career plans throughout their professional journey - for example, not all English men are interested in senior positions as widely assumed (Xu, 2012). More importantly, men practitioners tend to manifest a hybrid of personal and professional beliefs that lead to their variant styles of interactions with children (Skelton, et al., 2009; Brody, 2014; Brownhill, 2014 & 2015). To illustrate, some European men presented strong masculinised production of self and exhibited an overt power relationship between themselves and their pupils (Francis, 2008; Brody, 2014). They disciplined children very often and addressed their authority frequently (Francis, 2008). By contrast, there are also men who adopted a much more liberal style in their interactions with children and respect children equally (Francis, 2008; Brody, 2014). Power differences are far less obvious between the practitioners and pupils in such occasions (Francis, 2008). Additionally, some men's excessively masculinised subjectivities are reflected in their 'laddish engagement' with boys, as well as in their intentional resistance to all things feminine (Francis & Skelton, 2001; Francis, 2008). These will then result in exclusions to girls and other non-masculine boys in the classroom (ibids). More seriously, Francis and Skelton (2001) warned that some men's use of misogyny in their constructions of masculinity in educational settings can potentially constitute sexual harassment towards girls. Other men who reflected homophobia in their masculine gender subjectivities may then disadvantage constructions of non-heterosexual relationships (ibid). Whether all men are 'hypermasculine' or some can be particularly respectful to gender diversities and sensitive not to draw on gender stereotypes in their interactions with children, will be further investigated in this study.

Men ECEC practitioners' differences in their subjectivities may also be related to their ages, professional training pathways, working experiences, and any other individual experiences that they had prior to their job in ECEC (see Beijaard, 1995; Skelton et al., 2009; Sak & Sahin, 2012; Brody, 2015; Sak, Sak, & Yerlikaya, 2015 for details). Such diversities in male practitioners' subjective constructions and their subsequent practices thus challenge the assumed expectations that men practitioners can bring to ECEC merely because of their identification as male (Francis, 2008). Whilst it is still highly supported to have more men working in ECEC with young children, it is definitely not for the sake of their gender-biased contributions as men, but for the purpose of achieving a gender equitable and diversified environment for both children and practitioners themselves. That said, more attention should be paid to the complex and various ways in which men use discourses of gender and sexuality to negotiate their subjective positioning in the ECEC workforce (Francis & Skelton, 2003; Nentwich et al., 2013). It is also notable that some gender discourses may be taken up and wielded especially effectively by male subjects to establish unassailable power relations (Francis, 2008), particularly in a 'feminized profession' like ECEC.

4.2.3 Cultural variations in shaping ECEC practitioners' gender and professional subjectivities

The various gender discourses that men practitioners, and perhaps women practitioners as well, embody in their constructions of professional subjectivities, sometimes embrace cultural sensitivities that locate them. Although I have argued in previous chapters that cross-cultural studies in this area are limited but yet important to have, this section will hopefully provide a skeleton of how cultural variations may shape individual practitioners' gender and professional subjectivities drawing on currently available literature. To illustrate, in cultures where there is a particular concern about child abuse issues from men, such as Switzerland, Netherlands, and UK, men practitioners are especially sensitive about their physical contact with children; meanwhile in countries like Norway where such a child abuse suspicion towards men practitioners is of less concern, men practitioners are more open to any necessary physical contact with children (Xu, 2012; Brody, 2014). In Brody's (2014) book that researched about six case studies of men practitioners from six cultures, he also exemplified some cultural specifics such as the women's social status in Switzerland, the inter-cultural

influences in the United States, the impacts of army services in Israel, the Irish working class culture of East London in the UK, and the centrality of gender equity in Norway, and their considerable relevance to men's experiences working in ECEC in those countries. For example, in a conservative Swiss society, women are still dominant child carers and are discouraged from actively participating in the workforce; hence childcare and education are considerably regarded as women's job and it is deemed to be intimidating when a man wants to cross the gender boundary and to work with young children. In Israel, all men would have served the army and this is found to have influenced the male participant's leadership, disciplinary and hegemonic styles of interacting with children⁶. Furthermore, the different nature of ECEC systems, the national philosophy of ECEC pedagogies, the socio-economic situations, and the global and local political contexts (Osgood, 2005; Adriany & Warin, 2014; Petersen, 2014; Sandseter, 2014; Brody, 2014 & 2015; Rohrmann & Brody, 2015; Pirard, Schoenmaeckers, & Camus, 2015) that each culture situates, will all shape and be enacted through the gender discourses in which men and women practitioners construct their selves. For instance, the child-centred pedagogy is criticized by Adriany and Warin (2014), pointing out that it was employed by Indonesian kindergarten teachers (practitioners) in their study to normalise children's gendered behaviour. Rohrmann and Brody (2015) noted that the distinction between the 'unitary' and 'split systems' of ECEC provision in Europe lead to different levels of split between education and care - which are relevant to the 'gender regimes' of care and men's participation in ECEC (Peeters et al., 2015). The strong cultural representations that underpin ECEC are the larger domains for educational reform and social changes, within which gender is one among the many factors that intersect discursively to establish power relations.

4.3 Summary

To conclude this chapter, although the historically and socially constructed gender discourses that shape ECEC as a traditionally 'female profession' are being challenged internationally and locally in many countries, ECEC remains a career largely pursued by women all around the world. The public and political

⁶ For further details on how other differing social constructions of gender in these named countries affect experiences of men in ECEC differently, please see Brody, D. (2014). *Men who teach young children: an international perspective*. London: IOE Press.

inspirations to have more men working as ECEC practitioners are promising in addressing the gender imbalance in ECEC, and have the potential to shift traditional gender discourses for more diversified and equitable gender structures in ECEC and the wider society. However, deep into the issue of gender imbalance in ECEC lies the persistent power of dominant gender discourses that circumscribe ECEC as a working environment that embeds significant hegemony, especially under a world-wide agenda of professionalising ECEC. Both men and women ECEC practitioners are well situated in those discourses and their professional subjectivities are closely connected with them. Considering that ECEC practitioners' subjective positioning of their roles has unignorable influences on their working practices and everyday interactions with children, and thus impact on children's wellbeing in the early years, comprehensive understandings of how practitioners of both gender construct their professional subjectivities according to the various gender discourses specific to their social and geographical cultures are particularly necessary. The complex and discursive ways that men (and women) ECEC practitioners apply to negotiate their professional subjectivities within a hybrid set of gender discourses could be insightful sites to explore gender imbalance and inequalities that are deep-rooted in ECEC. In so doing, it is expected that both men and women ECEC practitioners can become reflective and sensitive practitioners (Zaman, 2008) who embody their subjectivities consciously and critically while working with young children, and pay particular attention to issues of justice and equalities in every aspect of ECEC.

So far, I have delineated how both children and practitioners actively construct their gender subjectivities in relation to dominant and sometimes non-traditional gender discourses located in their unique surroundings and cultural contexts. In the context of an ECEC environment, its everyday life consists of human interactions between children, adults, and most significantly, children and adult practitioners. The interactions between children and practitioners are well guided by their respective subjectivities at both sides including their gender subjectivities, and may mutually influence on each other subject to various circumstances. Children learn about their social world (partly) through their experiences with practitioners, and are also sources of knowledge and experiences for practitioners to enrich their own. Hence to understand the play of gender in affecting children-practitioner interactions and the consequent impacts on

children's welfares, both children's and practitioners' subjective opinions are to be explored. Only few pieces of research are able to do so, and this study will address this gap.

I have also elucidated that gender relations are enacted through power and sometimes dominant gender discourses can be so powerful that they are masked as 'taken-for-granted' characteristics that individuals enact 'naturally' and unconsciously. There might be gaps in terms of practitioners' and children's subjective positioning of gender and their actual gender performances, and observational data resources would help investigate to what extent practitioners' and children's gender positioning matches with their gender performances in the daily ECEC interactions. In this regard, the current study aims to contribute to the research gap of scarcity in studies that use observations to research about gender and ECEC (Rohrmann & Brody, 2015). Women practitioners' perspectives and experiences are to be included, complementing another literature gap with regards to ignorance of women's views in gender imbalance ECEC.

Last but not least, I have been consistently emphasizing in *Chapters 2, 3 & 4* that gender and its embodiment are fluid and unstable in response to various historical and social cultures. Discourses that individuals draw upon to construct their selves and direct their behaviours vary discursively from culture to culture, notwithstanding some shared patterns as results of intercultural communications the growing influence of globalisation. It is thus especially celebrated that cross-cultural investigations on gender variations that frame the structures of gender and ECEC differently throughout the world, could offer ground-breaking insight into the research field and perhaps beyond (Rohrmann & Brody, 2015). Again here the lack of such studies is underscored in literature, and will be a main contribution of this study. The inclusion of three cultures that are demographically variable and selected from the globally distinguished Western and non-western camps, would make the current study even more valuable (Brody, 2015). To minimise ethnocentrism in this study, I will pay particular attention to 'decentring' myself from any of those three cultural contexts and moving the study 'analytically in a direction in which any or all contexts are perceived as problematic' (DeVries, Wrede, Teijlingen, & Benoit, 2001, p. xiii).

Chapter 5 Methodology

As illustrated in my earlier chapters, existing literature in the area of gender balance and ECEC overemphasizes men's presence but largely ignores women's experiences and perspectives. Even less prominent is research relating to children's perspectives as to the ways in which the gender of ECEC practitioners gender may influence children's own needs, wellbeing and gender perceptions (Harris & Barnes, 2009). In addition, few studies on cross-cultural research have been conducted in this field, making it difficult to understand the role that culture plays in shaping the gendered ECEC workforce. Methodologically, the narratives of those men working in ECEC are considerably preferred by researchers (albeit sometimes women ECEC practitioners' narratives may also be included), which may be problematic when seeking to understand differences between as well as within genders. Rohrmann and Brody (2015) pointed out by reviewing several similar studies that self-reported data from participants revealed contradictions between their attitudes and reported behaviours. As a result, there is still much space for further understandings about gender in ECEC informed by multiple research methods.

Taking this into account, I used multi-methods and cross-cultural approaches in my study, for the purposes of including a hybrid of perceptions from different key stakeholders in ECEC, and of understanding gender and ECEC as situated in various cultures and discourses. My overall research aims are to examine how men and women practitioners interact with children in their daily life in early childhood settings, whether those practitioners' behaviours and performances are culturally gendered, and what reflections can be identified from those behaviours and performances about caring and teaching. Originated from the research aims and objectives, the following research questions were developed and used to guide the research design:

1. How do practitioners posit themselves as women/men working with young children in ECEC?
2. How do children view their practitioners' gender in relation to their daily interactions?

3. What is the nature of interactions between practitioners and children in ECEC settings? How far and to what extent can these interactions be seen to be gendered, and in what ways?
4. How far and to what extent can culturally-specific gender discourses be seen to have an impact on practitioner-child interactions in Scotland, Hong Kong and Mainland China, and in what ways?

In this chapter, an explanation of the ontological and epistemological stances underpinning this research will be presented first, followed by how the methodological approach was constructed accordingly. Methods used in the study will then be elucidated sequentially, together with empirical experiences and reflections from the data collection process. An introduction of the sample and contexts will come afterwards, after which I will present the ways in which the data was systematically coded and analysed. Finally, I will reflect on ways in which ethical issues, my own subjectivities, and other relevant issues that arose from the research process, may or may not have an impact upon the research results.

5.1 Qualitative research

In alliance with the poststructuralist theoretical position towards gender, this study also employs a poststructuralist discourse of interpretivism in qualitative research (O'Connor, 2001). A poststructuralist discourse of interpretivism features the ethos of traditional and critical interpretivisms, and points further to the fluidity and multiplicity of interpretations from the researchers and the researched (Ibid). First, it acknowledges the concept of 'existence' but agrees that all existence is interpreted by humans as 'knowledge' (O'Reilly, 2012). Knowledge is culturally and socially constructed, and is shaped and constrained by different contexts and purposes. To understand gender dynamics in different cultures, this research relies on interpretivist subjectivities of human beings including those of the participants and myself (as the researcher). The study aims to investigate how ECEC practitioners and children perform and interpret gender behaviours in different contexts (with an additional intention to also 'voice' those who are underrepresented in understanding the phenomenon of gender and men's participation in ECEC, i.e. women practitioners and children. See *Chapter 4, Section 4.3*) and how these performances and interpretations are linked with the wider social and cultural structures. Additionally, this research is constructed

through the ‘lens’ of my own interpretations, constrained and informed by the social contexts of the research and around myself as the researcher. Bryman (2012) argues that ‘it is not feasible to keep the values that a researcher holds totally in Check’ (p.39); and more importantly, research into education (or broadly speaking, social sciences) is deemed to be highly political by Newby (2010). As I discussed in the introduction, my personal values and background, especially those relevant to gender positioning, have led to the overarching research questions and aims of this specific study. These perceptions and experiences will then inevitably have some influence upon the data analysis and ultimately the findings and conclusions derived from that, as noted by Rohrmann and Brody (2015). They argue that contradictory results demonstrated by researchers in the field of gender and ECEC could be attributed to researchers’ biases (although interpretivists would argue that there will always be some degree of ‘contradiction’), and therefore appealed for transparency of researchers’ positioning in future research. Lastly, this research is aware that the participants’ interpretations were constructed in the specific contexts during the research process, subject to possible changes if for example, conducted at a different time, by a different researcher, or in a different environment. Likewise, my own interpretations in the analyses of findings are open to alternative interpretations and re-interpretation by others (Holloway & Wheeler, 2013).

Framed by a poststructuralist approach to interpretivism, this research adopted a qualitative approach for the purpose of cultural understandings, perceptions, and constructions of gender and ECEC (Berg & Lune, 2012). Qualitative research is regarded as suitable ‘to explore areas not yet thoroughly researched, [and] to take a holistic and comprehensive approach to the study of phenomena’ (Corbin & Strauss, 2015, p.5). In addition, despite their acknowledgement that both quantitative and qualitative research methodologies can offer meaningful insights into the issue of gender balance in ECEC, Rohrmann and Brody (2015) have criticized the problems of using quantitative strategies, particularly when cross-country comparisons are to be conducted. Firstly, they pointed out the inconsistencies of definitions and categorizations of early childhood settings in different countries, which significantly compromised the precision of comparisons among countries. They also cautioned that different structures of ECEC institutions, both within and across countries, should be taken into account for a

thorough and reasonable understanding of the research topic. As a consequence, qualitative research methods are preferred in this study, so as to elicit contextualized research findings. Practically, the small numbers of men who work in ECEC workforces in the researched countries also make large-sample quantitative investigations difficult and unfeasible for the sake of this study.

5.1.1 Multiple-approach-informed qualitative research

Whilst it falls under the umbrella of qualitative research, however, it is insufficient to label this research as situated with any single specific approach: it has been informed by a selection of qualitative approaches. Firstly, it is influenced by ethnographic approaches, as I became immersed in the daily life of researched early childhood settings (O'Reilly, 2012). This was reflected in my attention to the details of gendered activities and interactions in differing cultural settings, and asked the 'cultural insiders' (the practitioners and beyond) to reflect on and explain their interpretation of those activities and interactions (Tobin et al., 2009). Nonetheless, limited by the time spent within each setting and culture, this research is hardly a traditionally ethnographic one (O'Reilly, 2012). Secondly, this study also attends to the nature of case studies by implementing in-depth examination of a phenomenon in a number of 'cased' cultures, institutions, and individuals (Lichtman, 2013). But it is impossible to actually identify any distinct 'case' in this study, be it cultures, institutions, or individual practitioners; as the essential purpose of exploring gender and culture is inevitably involved with discussions and analyses at all levels.

Informed by ethnography and case study research design, I recognise the claim that such forms of research could be said to have limitations in terms of representativeness (or typicality as rephrased by qualitative researchers [Bryman, 2012]) and generalizations. Considering the small size of the available participant population, this study can never be as 'representative' as what would usually be expected from quantitative studies. In any case, Gobo (2008) argued that such claims of representativeness are meaningless if the sampling frames (lists of populations) are difficult to find or incomplete. Rohrmann and Brody (2015) remarked that there is ambiguity in relation to the statistics of men ECEC practitioners across countries, in that different categorizations of men who work in ECEC as either practitioners/teachers, caring staff, supporter workers, or non-

teaching or -caring members, have been included/excluded in different reports. For instance, in a report published by the Scottish Government on early learning and childcare statistics (Scottish Government, 2016), it suggests that men comprise 5% of General Teacher Council Scotland (GTCS)-registered teachers working in the early learning and childcare sector. However, GTCS-registered teachers exclude nursery nurses, early years practitioners, or early years officers who are the main staff bodies in Scottish early years centres or nurseries, and therefore were not included in this research as participants. The different positions that are associated with different types and level of responsibility add further complexities to the population. For example, in Chinese kindergartens, there are leading class teachers (practitioners) who take full responsibility of the classroom and the children, as well as associate class teachers (practitioners) who only share part of the responsibilities. There may also be Chinese ‘care’ teachers (practitioners) who are only responsible for issues of care for children. All categories are included in the ‘Teacher’ column in Chinese kindergartens, and due to the scarcity of men practitioners and in order to obtain a diversified research sample, men that work in any of the three positions were included in this research.

That said, this study is also aware of that, ‘when we do not possess complete information about the population, samples are selected according to their status on one or more properties identified as the subject matter for the research’ (Gobo, 2008, p.917). How men and women interact with young children in early childhood settings is a core aim of my research, hence I decided that all types of practitioners could be included as long as they have interactions with the children on a day-to-day basis. Based upon this prerequisite, the purpose of this study is therefore to describe and analyse the principal features of gender dynamics, rather than to produce general conclusions (Gobo, 2008). Further, in defending their choices of only one preschool from each country to be compared, Tobin and others (2009) argued that they attempted to explore contextualized meanings, cultural patterns, and social discourses that were evident from the schools, instead of focusing only on the research subjects themselves. This could be used to defend my intention of this study too, which is reflecting on cultural impacts on gender through analysis of selected samples in ECEC. The phenomena observed in my study may not be representative to the whole nation, but the focus is beyond the phenomena themselves, to find out how phenomena were interpreted by

practitioners and children with reference to the wider cultural and social discourses. What is more, as Bryman notes, ‘the findings of qualitative research are to generalize to theory rather than to populations.’ (Bryman, 2012, p.406)

5.1.2 Comparative and cross-cultural qualitative research

Although this research cannot be considered either traditionally ethnographic or as distinctly case study research, it can more definitely be described as being comparative and cross-cultural. The purpose of comparisons is to enhance a better understanding of the phenomenon researched (Bryman, 2012). Phillips and Schweisfurth (2014) declared that comparative study provides alternative and/or various practices and possibilities of educational phenomena, and would help shed light on them. Brody (2014) further advocated that our understanding of the effects of culture on the many aspects of gender balance could be better gained through cross-cultural comparisons. In this study, Scotland and China were chosen as sites of comparison for both academic and practical reasons. I have explained in my literature review chapters that, there remains some gaps of understanding in relation to gender issues in ECEC; whereas comparisons between cultures are deemed to be a promising way of addressing some of the gaps in this research area (Rohrmann & Brody, 2015). However, as of yet only a limited number of cross-cultural studies have been conducted (Brody, 2014 & 2015). Moreover, although there are many single-country studies on this topic conducted in countries such as England, Norway, Germany, Australia, and New Zealand, the countries of Scotland and China are among those where this topic has seen less investigation.

Moreover, apart from academic reasons to compare gender and ECEC in Scotland and China, I became aware of the potentially strong cultural differences based on my personal experience of living and studying in both cultures. Informed by Phillips and Schweisfurth’s (2014) matrix of familiarities with contexts and cultures in comparative education (p.67), this research adds Hong Kong as a transitional site between the two, for the purpose of a better level of sensitivity towards the cultures and their influences on gender and ECEC. Due to its historical and political specialities as a former colony to the UK and a current Special Administrative Region (SAR) of the People’s Republic of China (abbreviated as China), Hong Kong is assumed to be a place where British culture and Chinese culture ‘overlap’, albeit its own cultural uniqueness should never be neglected

(Zhang, 1998; Bray & Koo, 2004). By comparing between and among those three cultures, this study hopes to shed light on how cultural and intercultural influences may shape the connections between gender and ECEC.

However, it needs to be pointed out that, when I say ‘comparing cultures’, I am actually being rhetorical. Culture can be hard to define in the first place, and Alexander (2000) has demonstrated that ‘culture, in comparative analysis and understanding, and certainly in national systems of education, is all’ (p.30). Obviously, it is not possible to be able to compare ‘cultures’ merely by looking at a few educational sites, albeit that these sites are without any doubt parts of these cultures. But as I have argued in the end of *Section 5.1.1*, it is possible for this study to inform about cultures by examining how practitioners and children relate their interactions to the wider communities. After all, what happens in ECEC settings is an aspect of our wider society, and the character and dynamics of it are shaped by values that shape other aspects of our cultures (Alexander, 2000). The intention to compare gender and ECEC issues in Scotland, Hong Kong and Mainland China was thus inspired and then made possible after considering the practicalities.

Three cities including Edinburgh in Scotland, Tianjin in Mainland China, and Hong Kong itself, were eventually identified as the places where this research has been carried out (from now on, Mainland China will be used to replace China for the accuracy of its political terminology that China includes Hong Kong; whereas China/Chinese in the rest of this dissertation will include both Mainland China and Hong Kong). Only one city was selected in each of the comparison regions, primarily because Hong Kong is a city in terms of its political nature. Phillips and Schweisfurth (2014) have emphasized that comparisons are typically made on the basis of equivalences. Despite that Hong Kong may probably fit into the category of ‘cultural equivalence’ (categorized by Nowak and cited in Phillips & Schweisfurth, 2014) to Scotland and Mainland China, this study rigorously limited sampling in the two countries to individual cities so that complexities caused by regional differences within the cultures can be reduced to a minimum. At the same time, although I support that the character and dynamics of a city are also inevitably shaped by its country and therefore researching about a city is in a reasonable position to inform about the wider culture, I also admit that it can

never tell the full stories and that nor can it be uncritically generalized to other regions. This argument could also be applied to other equivalences including institutional equivalences in this study. All ECEC settings recruited in this research across the three cultures are regarded as comparable in its functional nature, meanwhile any structural differences within and across cultures relating to the researched topics will be considered and analysed.

Rohrmann and Brody (2015) have observed that there exist significant differences in terms of men working in ECEC in different areas of a country, particularly between urban and rural areas. In countries like Norway, Germany, and Austria, men ECEC practitioners tend to be found mostly in large cities and/or economically advantaged areas. This also seems to be the case in Mainland China according to my personal experiences and media reports, and in Scotland too after I conducted a provisional search of men ECEC practitioners in a range of areas there. Accordingly, I chose Tianjin as the representing city of China because of my confidence in finding enough participants there. The confidence was built upon my previous working experiences in Tianjin and my networks that could be used for recruitment. Edinburgh was identified as the Scottish city because it has a government-supported organization called 'Men in Childcare', which focuses on the training and support of men to become child carers or other types of ECEC practitioners. As I had little contact with local schools in Scotland, taking advantage of this organization made the recruitment easier and possible. Phillips and Schweisfurth (2014) pointed out that the researcher's personal experiences and situations in a specific researched context may have impacts on the processes and even results of the overall research project. Through the help of 'Men in Childcare' in Edinburgh, I was able to minimise the impact of my network shortage in Scotland.

I have so far discussed the justifications for the choices of countries and cities in this study. Further considerations were then given on the selection of institutions and how comparisons between institutions could add to the study. Peeters and others (2015) found that the nature and structures of institutions may also contribute to the complexities of men's participation in ECEC. In Mainland China, public kindergartens appear to be more attractive to men than private ones because positions in the former are usually lifelong and better paid (Xu &

Waniganayake, 2017). In Hong Kong, local and international kindergartens obviously are embedded with different school cultures due to their educational origins, practitioners' backgrounds, facilities, and so on. The early years centres in Edinburgh differ from private nurseries and primary school nursery classes, too; particularly in that the early years centres are keen to have male figures presented to their children in order to compensate for the perceived 'lack' or 'inadequacy' of a father's presence at home (according to information collected from my participant Scottish settings - see *Chapter 6, Section 6.3*). A fuller description on how those settings differ from each other and how the differences are relevant to the issue of gender and ECEC will be provided in the findings and discussion chapters to follow. Here I just want to emphasize the necessity of comparing between institutions (as structural and/or functional equivalences), so that more sophisticated and diverse representations of the research topic can be achieved. Since this research regards gender as fluid and intersectionally constructed, it is important to examine how a variety of factors may lead to diverse conceptions of gender and ECEC within a culture.

As stated by Phillips and Schweisfurth (2014), comparisons at all different levels of equivalences are necessary when interpreting educational phenomena and the interpretations at various levels may compensate for each other. The comparisons of institutions and individuals are nested in the comparisons of cultures in this study, and gender and ECEC in the selected settings are difficult to be understood without reference to wider cultures and contexts (Alexander, 2000; Bray & Koo, 2004; Tobin et al., 2009). Therefore, in this study, accounts for contextual factors and information are inevitable (Bryman, 2012; Phillips & Schweisfurth, 2014).

5.1.3 Multi-method approach in qualitative research

The theoretical positioning, research objectives, and methodological inquiries, all require detailed considerations of contextualized information in this research. And the issues of gender and ECEC to be investigated are complicated in that a wide range of intersectional factors may be embedded. In order to gain richness in understanding the complexities, my use of a multi-method approach would enhance my data and provide opportunities to compare, check and contrast. Three main types of data sources were used, including practitioner-child interactions in practice, collected through observations and from the researcher's

lens; practitioners' perceptions of their working experiences, as well as their interpretations of observed interactions, collected through formal and informal interviews; and children's perceptions of their interactions with the practitioners, collected through pictorial activities. The research also included other available sources of information such as informal talks with staff members and parents around the settings, literature, political and introductory documents at both national and local levels, and news and media publications.

The variety of data sources were able to compensate for each other and therefore enhanced the ability to interpret findings (Thurmond, 2001). For example, rather than purely interpreting observed incidences from the researcher's perspectives, the study also sought explanations from the practitioners and even children. Many factors and issues that lay behind the incidences, and that went beyond the research capacity of observational data, were thus discovered. Or the other way around, some of the behaviours or interactions observed were not even realized by the participants themselves, or might contradict with what they have told me in the interviews (this was particularly true when some practitioners revealed inconsistencies in terms of how they understood gender and how they actually 'did' gender). The compensation of various sources further appeared to be of significant importance while researching about children's perceptions. As the children's ages included in this study range from 2 years old to 6, their language abilities and understanding levels varied and were largely limited. Correspondingly, their views could not be gathered by only asking them to orally express themselves. Their reactions and performances as observed in their daily practices, and their practitioners' (who were supposed to know them quite well) interpretations about their certain behaviours, could both work as supplements to better be able to understand their perspectives.

In addition to the compensations for different types of data sources, a multi-method approach also facilitated the process of transparentising credibility and validity in this research (Bryman, 2004; Meijer, Verloop, & Beijaard, 2002; Cho & Trent, 2006). On agreement with Cho and Trent's (2006) claim that validity is a recursive process in qualitative research, I aimed to be transparent and reflective about my research processes throughout this research. The multi-method approach helped in this regard. Although I mentioned in the last paragraph that

contradictions between practitioners' gender understandings and behaviours may be possible, the validation of different data sets through multiple methods would facilitate awareness of those contradictions and subsequently promote more sophisticated interpretations of them. In other words, both consistencies and contradictions are allowed in validating the data and are treated as 'valid' for the purpose of this specific research, as long as sufficient reasons and/or explanations are provided to demonstrate their sensibilities. In order to culminate the effectiveness of a multi-method approach in research studies, rigorousness in its data analysis is required. I will expand upon this later in the current chapter, and before that I will first of all introduce the methods used and how those methods were practically implemented in the data collection process.

5.2 Research methods

Three main types of qualitative methods were used in this research, which will be discussed in the sequences of observations, interviews, and pictorial activities in the coming paragraphs. All research was conducted under adherence to British Educational Research Association (BERA) ethical guidelines (BERA, 2011) and in accordance with the ethical approval process by the university (see *Section 5.7* below).

5.2.1 Observations

Motivated by the need for more observational research on practitioners' gender and its impact upon their day-to-day work with young children (Brody, 2014 & 2015; Rohrmann & Brody, 2015), I intended to find out how male and female ECEC practitioners interact with children in their daily settings. The observation was more or less unstructured, though considerably informed by research objectives and insights from existing literature (Brody, 2014; see *Appendix I* for a guiding observation protocol). It focused on the whole of a typical, coherent day in early childhood settings in the three cultures, so as to capture all possible interactions between the practitioners and the children and representing the complexity and dynamics in ECEC. Usually in each setting, I often used one day to get myself familiarized with the daily routines, the organization of the classrooms, and the practitioners and children; at the same time, some remarkable incidences that were relevant to the research topic were also noted down. Then there were a few more days of observations either focusing on the interactions between children

and the male/female practitioner, or both. Children's individual and group behaviours were sometimes recorded also, if regarded as relevant. In classrooms where there were more than two staff members (which were cases in all Scottish and Mainland Chinese settings), emphasis was put on the two participant practitioners for easier and in-depth data collection. However, the non-participating staff members' interactions with the children were sometimes also written down when they were particularly interesting, and were expected to be potentially contributing to the research findings.

The effectiveness of observation was assured by observing for more than one day and the observations would only cease when the researcher felt that nothing really special had been observed that differed from previous days. In addition to written descriptions of observed behaviours and incidences, I also sought explanations of certain scenarios from the practitioners (or sometimes the children if they were able to illustrate), for well informed data sources. The observation notes were further supplemented by daily fieldwork diaries that I wrote at the end of each fieldwork day, for summarizing the overall impressions and guiding later observations.

Specifically, I started with the intention to observe at a distance, but it turned out to be impossible with young children who are usually less independent, nor in early childhood settings that are often very busy and turbulent. Having realized this during my pilot studies, I then decided to become partially involved in the classroom life either actively or passively. This happened in two ways. Firstly, I sometimes acted as a participant in some of the activities, such as stories, singing, and outdoor activities, allowed me to familiarize myself with the setting more quickly, to learn about the cultures in different settings, and most importantly, to gain trust from and build relationships with the children and the practitioners. Secondly, I sometimes acted as an 'alternative' to other staff members (especially when they were unavailable to all children) who sometimes helped with the organization of the classroom and to whom the children may turn for help. This, on the one hand, enabled the children to feel close to me; but on the other hand, it also gave the children an impression that I might be one of the 'disciplinarians' in the classroom. Although this kind of impression was not obvious enough to have influenced the research, I was aware that some children may have felt obligated

to agree when I approached them for the pictorial activities. Moreover, this participation led me myself to become one of the ‘researched’, a participant whose interactions with the children sometimes revealed gendered aspects related to this research. Being a man who was unusual in early childhood settings myself, how the children responded to me in possibly gendered ways appeared to be worthwhile data for this project. At the same time, in minimising the negative impacts of my involvements in the researched environments, I paid particular attention not to interfere with how the practitioners lead and organize the days, not to ever discipline the children, and to reduce the possible power distance through play with them.

5.2.2 Interviews with ECEC practitioners

I mentioned while describing the observation process that, explanations on certain observed interactions were sought from the practitioners. This made up part of the interviewing instruments and was conducted either formally or informally. Depending on each participant’s time availability, I sometimes talked to them informally throughout the day or found a separate time to discuss the incidences formally. It was rather flexible due to the practitioners’ busy schedules. Both ways worked well and no significant difference was noted. More importantly, a formal interview was also carried out with every participant practitioner to explore their experiences and knowledge about working with young children as well as their perspectives on gender and ECEC. A list of questions and themes were prepared for a more purposeful interviewing (see *Appendix II* for the interviewing questions and themes), but space was allowed for opened-up answers and topics around the issue of gender and ECEC. The interview usually took around 0.5 - 1 hour and took place in the participant’s workplace. All interviews were recorded with the interviewees’ consent. The interviews were supposed to be completed at the beginning of the fieldwork, for me to become relatively informed for the observations. However, and again, this was compromised by time realities and the interviews happened flexibly before, during, or after the observation periods. The planned attempt to contextualize through the interviews was not badly affected though, as my knowledge about the macro and micro contexts were obtained either through informal talks with head teachers, the participant practitioners themselves, other staff members, and the observations, or were naturally increased as my fieldwork experiences were enriched.

Trustworthiness of the interviews was endeavoured by making it aware to the participants that this research would by no means judge or assess their professional performance, and through building up trusted relationships between the researcher and the researched.

5.2.3 Pictorial activities with young children

For comprehensive understanding of gender and ECEC, both practitioners' and children's perceptions were investigated in this research. Considering the difficulties and limitations of directly interviewing young children (Tisdall, Davis, & Gallagher, 2009; Waller & Bitou, 2011), I used pictures to facilitate children's expressions about their views towards gender and their practitioners. Three pictures were produced for the children's review, representing three types of adult behaviours that were common (or at least may happen) in early childhood settings and were culturally regarded as 'female-oriented', 'male-oriented', or 'gender-neutral' respectively (see *Appendix III* for the pictures). The first picture involves a person carrying a child in his/her arms, the second is about someone kicking a ball, and lastly there is an adult reading a book (stories) in the third picture. All three persons were represented by (what I intended to be) gender-ambiguous figures for the children to interpret. For each picture, the children were primarily asked about what they saw, who they saw, and why; and further conversations were encouraged according to the children's responses (see *Appendix IV* for a list of guiding questions). In their answers I probed for issues of gender, and I specifically discussed the pictures in relation to the children's practitioners so that they were able to comment about their practitioners' gender. Conversations with the children lasted up to 10 minutes and were recorded with their own and parents' permission. The pictorial activities usually happened after a few days' observations, when the children were getting familiarized and close to me.

Using pictorial activities to do research with young children turned out to be welcomed by the children, as many of them actively enquired to do the activities with me. Their perspectives about gender and their practitioners were reflected in their answers, providing interesting and useful data for this research. Many of those answers coincided with data collected through observations and

practitioners' interviews too, hence are considered to be trustworthy. However, upon critical reflections I am also aware that the research findings should be analysed in manners that take into account several considerations. Firstly, the children's answers may be contradictory. Although I had not been able to check the consistency of all children's responses, I randomly 'tested' some of them by asking the same questions more than once and at different times (or sometimes it was the children themselves who came to me and offered to do the activities again). Some of their answers could be different from time to time, but not necessarily regarded as invalid. From a poststructuralist perspective, it is possible that children see things slightly differently according to different contexts, situations and interacting with different people. For instance, many practitioners who participated in my research stated that, when a child said he/she likes a particular practitioner, it does not mean that he/she does not like the other practitioners. It may be that at a certain time and for a certain reason, the child likes that practitioner 'more' than the rest.

Secondly, the children's answers may be influenced by their peers. To reduce the uneasiness of one-to-one conversations possibly revealed by some children, I tried to do the activities with more than one child at the same time. But it turned out to be an inadequate strategy as the children would often repeat one another's words. Although this idea was later totally abandoned in my research, I have noted that even when having the conversation individually, the children's answers would somehow be influenced by others. For ethical considerations and in order to provide the children with a comfortable environment, all activities with children were conducted in the classrooms or around. As a consequence, the activities were therefore exposed to other children who liked to be around and give answers (this was particularly true for those who had already done the activities). In most cases these children were gently encouraged to move on to other activities either by the practitioners or myself, so such impacts were indeed at minimum. Having said that, I would also acknowledge the peer influence on the construction of children's gender identities and world values (Frosh, Phoenix, & Pattman, 2002; Ashley, 2003).

Last but not least, the children's answers can be seen to be constrained by a number of factors. I already mentioned that some children may have felt nervous

during the one-to-one conversation, probably because they had little experience of doing this kind of activity and especially when it was with a relative stranger. A further reason that may lead to children's uncomfortableness was the power distance perceived by them, and this was particularly true in Hong Kong and Mainland China. Although I tried my best to distance myself from overt performances of unequal power relations (Punch, 2002), I was sometimes inevitably involved in them. For example, the practitioners in Chinese kindergartens sometimes used me as a way of disciplining the children, by saying that: 'if you don't behave, Mr Xu will take you away'; or that 'Mr Xu will write down your bad behaviours in his notebook'. Most children would know that these were just jokes as they knew what I had been doing, but some may consequently be 'scared' of me. In addition, when I approached some children and they declined to do the activities with me, the practitioners in both Mainland China and Hong Kong would then help me to make the request a second time (without being asked to). Even if not necessarily urging the children, the practitioners' power as they practiced in everyday life may have impacted the request and therefore made some children feel obligated and pressured. In resolving these problems, I either explicitly told the children not to panic, that this was not a test and they were free to go if they did not want to do it, or used a few strategic techniques to calm them down. To illustrate, I may play toys or chat about their families with them. In case that some children might be afraid to say no, I observed their reactions all throughout the activities. Facial expressions, eye contacts, and body languages such as looking around or playing with their clothes, were all possible indications of their reluctance and/or nervousness. Once any of those were noted, I then used the strategy just mentioned and they worked well with the majority of the children. In a few cases when the children still felt unwell, I stopped the research and let them go.

The age group of the children, and their corresponding language ability, understanding level, and confidence level, could make a difference, too. These abilities also varied from child to child. Where the selection of children participants' ages relied on the age groups that the male practitioners recruited worked with, this research had to include children from as young as 2 years old up to the age of 6. Most children at the ages of 2-3 in this research were unable to orally express their views and some older children would also struggle to talk

freely. With the anticipation that it was reasonable that not all children would get involved in the research, I tried my best to include as many as possible. And any information from the children, whether it was a yes or no answer, a name, or a long sentence, was treated equally and analysed properly in alliance with the research questions.

Overall, this research adopted a reflective approach in minimising the disadvantages of chosen methods and in solving problems that emerged during the research process. Some issues were unavoidable and were therefore made transparent in this chapter, especially those relating specifically to research with young children.

5.3 Sampling and participants

This study encountered various difficulties in recruiting participating early childhood settings in the three cross-cultural cities identified, mainly due to the scarcity of suitable men ECEC practitioners available. University staff from Scottish, HK and Mainland Chinese universities were the primary networks used to identify at least one or more settings, and snowball sampling was then adopted and turned out to be particularly efficient in finding participants through the practitioners' own networks. All participants in Hong Kong and Mainland China were recruited through these ways. In Edinburgh, I further took advantage of the Men in Childcare organization and was eventually able to find enough early years centres for my study; staff members from the City of Edinburgh Council helped me access to private nurseries; and I phoned enough numbers of primary schools from the Council's school list to find and recruit suitable primary school nursery classes (for an explanation of the differences between the three kinds of settings and how they are relevant to this research, see below). All settings fulfilled the fundamental selection criteria that were informed by research aims and literature, and were further adjusted to practical realities. At the same time, they also exhibited a diversity of characteristics of ECEC systems in the three cultures.

5.3.1 The selection criteria

Bearing in mind the structural differences of early childhood systems and settings in Scotland, Hong Kong, and Mainland China, this research used the criteria of functional equivalence (Philips & Schweisfurth, 2014) to identify suitable and

comparable settings in the three identified cities of Edinburgh, Hong Kong, and Tianjin City. That is, settings with a key function as day care (and education) centre for children before primary schooling. I intended to find early childhood settings where children attend schools regularly, and usually from morning to afternoon, Monday to Friday. Child minders and after-school clubs in Edinburgh, and early childhood centres in Tianjin were thus excluded. I then sought to find settings where there are at least a man and a woman ECEC practitioner working with the same group of children. The practitioners were normally expected to be full-time staff members that stay with the children on a regular basis, hence part-time practitioners or subject teachers who only spent a limited time with children were excluded. The children's age group was originally set as 4-5 based on the assumption that they would be able to have a sufficient language and understanding levels for this research, but had to be expanded to 2-6 years old as a result of limitations in finding enough male practitioners. No restrictions on the practitioners' qualifications, ages, positions, or any other demographic backgrounds, were set. Due to time constraints on fieldwork, settings that matched with the above criteria were chosen on a 'first-agreed-first-researched' basis.

5.3.2 The participants

Consequently, 5 early childhood settings in each of the three cities were recruited. The quantity of 5 (15 altogether) was deemed to be appropriate for the nature of this study and was feasible for its research scale and practicality. The settings represented a variety of geographic spreads of the cities albeit non-purposefully. The male and female practitioners' positions, ages, and other backgrounds were various and would contribute to knowledge about intersections of gender and other factors in this research. Specifically, the three main early childhood provision types of early years centres, private nurseries and primary school nursery classes in Edinburgh were all included in this research, for examining how structural nature of different kinds of early childhood settings would have impacted gender dynamics in ECEC (Rohrmann & Brody, 2014). Both public and private kindergartens in Tianjin were recruited for the same purpose, although only one private kindergarten was eventually identified. This was partly because in Mainland China, men practitioners tend to be found more in public kindergartens where there are better salaries and welfare benefits. Similarly in

Hong Kong, local and international kindergartens were both targeted but access to international kindergartens had turned out to be impossible, due to their highly privatised nature and the corresponding sensitivities of protecting the identity of their pupils.

Apart from the 15 settings in my main study, there were two additional early years centres that originally worked as pilot studies in this research. Refinements and adjustments of methodology and methods were completed at that stage to make the research design as it was introduced above. However, during the data collection process in my main study, I sensed that these two centres appeared to demonstrate some important differences from both the centres and nurseries researched in Edinburgh, and the rest of kindergartens in Hong Kong and Mainland China. Since the increase of men's participation in ECEC is only a recent development in the two latter regions, few of them were found to be over the age of 40 in this study. It may also be related to the social and economic pressures placed on men in Chinese societies (see further explorations in the *Findings* chapters). In Edinburgh, men at a wide range of ages could be found in the ECEC workforce according to my experience. However, the five male participants in my main study happened to be younger and as a result overall, the intersections of gender and age in influencing on practitioner-child interactions were under-examined in this research. I have noticed that some younger men ECEC practitioners in all three cultures seemed to conduct a lot of 'rough and tumble' plays with the children, whereas the older men practitioners that I worked with did not appear to undertake this as often. Although far from generalizable, I have included the two pilot studies in the data analysis of this research for a possibly more diversified picture of gender and ECEC.

In the below tables and paragraphs, all participants' background information and a quick introduction of contexts are presented, and will be later referred to in reporting the findings. For easier reference, city abbreviations and sequential numbers were used to represent the names of the settings. Early years practitioners, kindergarten teachers, nursery nurses and any other working titles that used in different settings, are all referred to as 'Practitioners' in this study unless specified.

Table 5-1 Participants' demographic information - 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	No.	18 ⁷	Around 20	Around 25	14 / 17 ⁸	5-10	Around 20	20-30
	Age	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
	Boy/Girl	9/9	10/10	Roughly half/half	9/5; 11/6	Roughly half/half	Roughly half/half	Roughly half/half
	Ethnicity	Scottish	Scottish	Mixed cultures	Mostly Scottish	Mixed cultures	Mixed cultures	Mixed cultures
Position	MP ⁹	Early Years Officer		Nursery Practitioner	Early Years Practitioner	Early Years Officer	Deputy Manager	Early Years Practitioner
	WP					Nursery Practitioner	Practitioner	Early Years Officer
Age	MP	46	58	33	29	48	38	45
	WP	Nearly 50	45	28	28	28	25	46
Working Experience	MP	9 yrs	12 yrs	1.5 yrs	3 yrs	13 yrs	10 yrs	4 yrs
	WP	25 yrs	27 yrs	1.5 yrs	7 yrs	5 yrs	1 yr	23 yrs
Qualifications	MP	Higher National Certificate (HNC) Early Education and Childcare		BSc Physics	BA; HNC	HNC	SVQ Level 3	HNC
	WP			SVQ Level 3	BSc; HNC	BA; HNC	HNC	HNC
(Self-identified) Ethnicity	MP	British	White British	British	White Scottish	White British	White Scottish	White Scottish
	WP	Scottish	Scottish	White Scottish	Scottish	Scottish	White Scottish	White Scottish

⁷ 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.

⁸ This centre had separate groups for mornings and afternoons.

⁹ 'MP' is short for 'Man Practitioner' & 'WP' stands for 'Woman Practitioner'.

Table 5-2 Participants' demographic information - Hong Kong (HK)

Setting		HK1	HK2	HK3	HK4	HK5
Type		Local ¹⁰	Local ¹¹	Local ¹²	Local ¹³	Local ¹⁴
Location		Central	Northwest	East	West	North
Class level		K2	K3	K2	K2	K3
Children	<i>No.</i>	20	25/10 ¹⁵	23	22	28 ¹⁶
	<i>Age</i>	4-5 yrs	5-6 yrs	4-5 yrs	4-5 yrs	5-6 yrs
	<i>Boy/Girl</i>	10/10	15/10; 4/6	15/8	9/13	13/15
	<i>Ethnicity</i>	Almost all children are Chinese ¹⁷ with occasionally one or two non-Chinese in the class.				
Position	All male and female participants are class teachers (practitioners).					
Age	<i>MP</i>	Early 20s	21	Early 30s	26	24
	<i>WP</i>	Early 30s	44	30+	30+	33
Working Experience	<i>MP</i>	2 yrs	< 1 yr	8 yrs	4 yrs	2 yrs
	<i>WP</i>	20 yrs	18 yrs	18 yrs	13 yrs	10-11 yrs
Qualifications	<i>MP</i>	HD ¹⁸	HD; Bachelor (ongoing)	HD; BEd (Special Education)	HD; BEd; MEd (ongoing)	HD; BEd; MEd (ongoing)
	<i>WP</i>	N/A	BEd ¹⁹	Bed	BEd	HD; BEd (ongoing)
Ethnicity	<i>All practitioners are local who grew up, attended schools, and work in Hong Kong.</i>					

¹⁰ Run by Hong Kong council of the Church of Christ in China.

¹¹ Run by Hong Kong Taoist Convention.

¹² Run by The Baptist Convention of Hong Kong.

¹³ Run by Hong Kong Young Women's Christian Association.

¹⁴ Run by Tung Wah Group of Hospitals.

¹⁵ This kindergarten had two separate groups of children for the mornings and the afternoons.

¹⁶ 16 children only stayed for the mornings, the rest stayed for the whole day.

¹⁷ 'Chinese' here refers to Hong Kongnese, Mainland Chinese, or mix of the two.

¹⁸ 'HD' is short for 'Higher Diploma in Early Childhood Education'.

¹⁹ 'BEd/MEd' stands for 'Bachelor/Master in Early Childhood Education' here.

Table 5-3 Participants' demographic information - 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	No.	28	33	15	27	35
	Age	5-6 yrs		4-5 yrs	5-6 yrs	3-4 yrs
	Boy/Girl	11/17	18/15	8/7	17/10	17/18
	Ethnicity	All Chinese (including minority Chinese ²⁰).				
Position	MP	Assistant Practitioner		‘Care’ practitioner ²¹	Leading Practitioner	Assistant Practitioner
	WP	Leading Practitioner		Leading Practitioner	Assistant Practitioner	Leading Practitioner
Age	MP	25	23	20	27	20
	WP	Early 30s	47	27	26	Late 40s
Working Experience	MP	3 yrs	3 yrs	2-3 yrs	2 yrs	3 yrs
	WP	4 yrs	26 yrs	4 yrs	1.5 yrs	28 yrs
Qualifications	MP	Bed		HD	Bachelor in Management	HD
	WP	Master in Sports	Bed			
Ethnicity	All are Chinese.					

²⁰ 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.

²¹ 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'.

Corresponding with the classes of the practitioners who participated in the study, there were 280 children, 148 boys and 132 girls, who participated in the pictorial activities from participant settings in Edinburgh, Hong Kong, and Tianjin (*Table 5-4*). It should be noted that Edinburgh has a relatively smaller number of participants, due to the previously explained context that most of the male early years practitioners/officers were found in early years centres that serve mainly children from disadvantaged families in deprived areas of Edinburgh. Many of those children can either be as young as around 2 years old (thus lacking the required level of literacy for the pictorial activity), or be less confident/able in their languages due to socio-economic issues at the family home. In the pilot study that I conducted with some of those children in two early years centres, both the children's practitioners (the familiar) and myself (the stranger) asked the children to indicate who the practitioner in each picture is. It seemed that these children would, in most cases, randomly pick up a name from the list of practitioners' names that we provided (usually the last name they hear), and may not be able to articulate any reasons. Exceptionally, some children tended to consistently pick up the name of their key workers, suggesting the significance of the Key Worker System²² that transcends other factors such as gender in affecting practitioner-child relationships in Scottish ECEC settings. Such influences are as well evident in my conversations with other participant children, which will be presented later in *Chapter 8*. Those children with limited verbal facility in expressing themselves were thus unable to participate in the pictorial activities, and their contribution was included through observing their interactions with practitioners in *Chapter 9*.

Table 5-4 No. of children participating in the pictorial activity

City	No. of Boys	No. of Girls	Overall
Edinburgh	31	24	55
Hong Kong	56	52	108
Tianjin	61	56	117
			Total: 280

5.3.3 Contextualizing the research

²² In a Key Worker System, each practitioner acts as a key worker to several children (usually randomly allocated). He/she will be the main liaison practitioner for the allocated children, in aspects such as documenting the children's files, responding to parents, etc.

In this paragraph, a summary of the three researched cities and their ECEC systems is briefly introduced. Located in the east coast of Scotland, UK, Edinburgh is both Scotland's capital city and one of the largest cities in the UK. Edinburgh runs a specific organization called 'Men in Childcare' that trains men to become early years practitioners. Most of these practitioners are found specifically in early years centres that reside in multi-deprived areas of Edinburgh. According to explanations from participant centres' managers and staff members, families from those areas are usually under-privileged and may experience social problems such as domestic violence, and drug/alcohol abuse. Men practitioners are therefore expected to provide alternative (and positive) male figures to any fathers who were violent, or to compensate for father absence for children living within the areas. Hong Kong is a leading economic Asian city in the south of China, and is a Special Administration Region that uses a UK-influenced capitalist economic system. The local kindergartens account for about 86.4% of all kindergartens in Hong Kong (Education Bureau, 2017), and are usually run by religious associations such as Hong Kong Church of Christ, or other non-profit communities like Tung Wah Hospitals. Lastly, Tianjin is one of the four municipalities²³ in Mainland China and is among economically advantaged Chinese cities. In recent years some advanced Chinese provinces/cities in the east coast have launched policies to encourage male participation in ECEC²⁴. Although Tianjin is not one of them so far, a widely publicised importance of men's roles has been evident here. More and more men practitioners are found in Tianjin kindergartens, particularly as physical education (PE) teachers. Specifically, as I mentioned earlier, most men practitioners are inclined to work in public kindergartens as a results of better salaries and welfare benefits (Xu & Waniganayake, 2017). A further introduction of the three ECEC systems is provided in the following table:

²³ The other three are: Beijing, Shanghai, and Chongqing.

²⁴ For example, Jiangsu Province, Quzhou in Zhejiang Province, and Fujian Province. See Xu and Waniganayake (2017) for details.

Table 5-5 Early Childhood Systems in Scotland, Hong Kong, and Mainland China

Country/Region	Scotland	Hong Kong	Mainland China
Main types of ECEC providers (No. & Percentage)	Early Years Centres; Private Nurseries; Primary School Nursery Classes;	Non-profitable Local Kindergartens (876; 86.4%); Profitable Non-local Kindergarten (138; 13.6%)	Public Kindergartens ²⁵ ; Private Kindergartens
Class categories	Infant room: 18 months; Toddler room: 2-3 yrs; Preschool room: 3-5 yrs;	K1 (Nursery): 3-4 yrs; K2 (Lower Class): 4-5 yrs; K3 (Upper Class): 5-6 yrs;	Nursery Class: 2-3 yrs; Lower-level Class: 3-4 yrs; Middle-level Class: 4-5 yrs; Upper-level Class: 5-6 yrs;
Class size and practitioner-child ratio	Infant: 1:3; Toddler: 1:5; Preschool: 1:8. Usually the numbers of children vary from day to day. The practitioners' numbers may also change accordingly, from 2 to 5 or more.	Official requirement - 1:15; Usually in the five schools that I visited, there are about 20 - 30 pupils with 2 practitioners.	Official requirement: 30 - 40 children depending on class level (public kindergartens) ²⁶ ; There are usually three members of staff in one class - 2 teaching practitioners and 1 'care' practitioner.
Tuitions	Up to 600 free hours for above 3s; 2-year-olds may enjoy free hours subject to family circumstances; Parents can purchase extra hours from private nurseries or some centres.	The Government 'Voucher Scheme'; High fees for international schools; 15 years free education from 2017/18;	Vary a lot from public to private kindergartens; Free kindergarten education in some highly developed cities/provinces;

²⁵ Positions in Chinese public kindergartens are usually tenure jobs ('*bianzhi*' in Chinese), which are associated with better welfare and salaries. In Chinese culture, a job with '*bianzhi*' is well respected and therefore highly popular. However, it's getting harder nowadays in China to gain such a '*bianzhi*', even if in public kindergartens. This context is particularly relevant to the increase of men kindergarten teachers in Tianjin.

²⁶ Class size in private kindergartens may vary; for example, the class in a private kindergarten that I visited in Tianjin has 15 children with 3 members of staff.

Practitioner qualifications	HNC	Childcare Diploma or above	Secondary Education or above
Language(s) of instruction	English	Cantonese as instruction language; All children are required to learn English and Chinese Mandarin as second languages.	Mandarin as instruction language; English is learned as a second language, but it may vary from school to school.
Curriculum	Curriculum for Excellence; Getting it Right for Every Child.	Guide to the Pre-primary Curriculum	Guideline to the Learning and Development of Children Aged 3-6; Teaching Guideline for Preschool Education.
Notes	Free play is at the core of children's daily life in the settings. There is some group time (singing and stories) for limited minutes and frequencies.	<p>In both Hong Kong and Mainland China, although there is no official requirement in academic achievements for entrance to primary schools, academic achievements (numeracy, literacy, writing, etc.) are highly valued by parents and the two cultures as of importance for children's 'good start'. In Hong Kong, all kindergartens may teach children about subject areas of reading, counting, and writing; in Tianjin, there is official requirement that kindergartens are not allowed to teach subject areas (but to implement play-based learning) --- some kindergartens that I visited did not teach those subject areas, but some still did so unofficially.</p> <p>Due to academic requirements and limitations of practitioner-pupil ratios, group activities are quite common and frequent in the majority of Mainland Chinese and Hong Kong kindergartens. Children are increasingly enjoying corner/area activities in their 'free choices' as required by the curriculum (which mirrors to a high extent Western curriculums such as the Early Years Foundation Stage in England).</p>	

5.4 Data Collection

The data collection process lasted for about a year in the three cities. I started with the two pilots in Edinburgh in December 2014 and then flew to Hong Kong for about 4 months there (January - May 2015). Another 2 months (June - July 2015) were spent in Tianjin before I went back to Scotland and finished the rest of the fieldwork in Edinburgh (November 2015 - March 2016). The different lengths of time spent in different cities corresponded with my familiarities with the places. Within each city I normally spent up to 5 days in a single setting, and it was sometimes longer depending on how the children's pictorial activities went. Observations and formal interviews with the participant practitioners were conducted non-successively, and were subject to the practitioners' availabilities. My information about and familiarity with the contexts increased gradually through both methods, and I also seized any opportunity to informally talk with the head teachers and other staff members for further informed backgrounds throughout the process. Pictorial activities with children were usually started after I had spent a few days in the classrooms interacting with and familiarizing with the children, and may be conducted throughout the day with each individual child during free activities. I noted down observational data manually, and interviews/conversations with the participants were recorded. No regular photos or videos were taken of the interactions between practitioners and children in line with ethical considerations, although in some settings (in Hong Kong and Tianjin) I took a few photos of group activities that happened with the school/practitioners' permission. Children's faces were avoided in those photos and they were only used as 'aide memoire' to the fieldwork notes. I also took pictures of the environments and classrooms with the permission of both the head teachers and practitioners in the researched classrooms.

5.5 Languages of data collection

The data was collected in three different languages in this research, including English in Edinburgh, Cantonese in Hong Kong, and Mandarin Chinese in Tianjin. Although I believed that my familiarity with all three languages²⁷ and my own previous experiences as an early childhood practitioner were able to reduce the

²⁷ I am a native Mandarin Chinese speaker, have lived in the Cantonese-speaking city of Guangzhou (a city close to Hong Kong) for several years, and have been studying and working in the UK since 2010.

cross-language impact on this research to minimum (Twinn, 1997), rigorous attention was paid to the translation and analysis of data. To illustrate, specific notes and explanations were given to words and sentences that are deemed to be context-specific and may possibly impact on the presentation of findings.

5.6 Data Analysis

I started analysing the data from as early as when I was doing the fieldwork and when I converted all data into organized manuscripts. All observational notes were tidied up and made electronic right after each of the fieldwork day, and some initial analytical thoughts were added either as comments on the notes or in daily fieldwork diaries. Interview recordings with both practitioners and children were transcribed by myself and were then analysed in their original languages. Due to the large amount of data from practitioners' interviews, I used NVivo to assist with the analysis - primarily, practitioners' interviewing manuscripts were imported into NVivo and categorized in the order of Country-Institution-Individual (institutional and individual names were all replaced with pseudonyms, see *Appendix V* for a reference list). Children's answers were inserted into Excel forms. Each institution stands as a separate Excel file and comprises three forms that each responds to one of the three pictures used. On the form, children's names (pseudonyms) were listed in the first column, followed by their gender in the second. Other columns were then framed by the guiding questions that I used to promote conversations with children, including: what is the person doing in this picture, who is the person, why do you think is him/her; which practitioner can the person be, why that particular practitioner; have you ever seen the practitioners doing the activity in the picture, which practitioner would you prefer to when doing the activity, and why. A last column of 'Others' was further added to include children's answers/quotes that do not fit any of the questions. During these processes, some initial themes and topics as emerging from the data sets (mainly observational notes and practitioners' interviews) were noted down.

A more systematic data analysis was then carried out, framed by my research questions and divided into four major stages. Each stage of data analysis was used to prepare the three findings chapters (*Chapters 7, 8 & 9*) and the discussions and conclusion chapters (*Chapters 10 & 11*) separately. Cross-referencing was sustained at all stages, in linking different data sets to exemplify contradictions,

consistencies, and/or complementary explanations of practitioner-child interactions. Cross-cultural comparisons and analyses were also conducted throughout, noting different or similar discourses that impact on the gender dynamics and complexities in ECEC settings in Scotland, Hong Kong and Mainland China. As I said in *Chapter 4*, I tried to ‘decentre’ myself when conducting those comparisons and to analyse the similarities and differences amongst cultures in a way that regard any context as problematic (DeVries et al., 2001; Tobin et al., 2009; Brody, 2014).

5.6.1 Stage 1: Analysing practitioners’ gender subjectivities

At stage one, a hybrid approach of inductive and deductive coding and theme development was used to identify key themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). Primarily, four overarching themes were identified as framed by the interview questions. These include: selecting ECEC as a career, coping with social stigmas, working in ECEC, and future career plans. Secondly, several sub-themes were developed based upon their frequency of emergence in participants’ reflections. Those sub-themes were predominantly related to the theme of men’s and women’s experiences working in ECEC. After all those themes/sub-themes were identified, corresponding codes were created using NVivo and related quotes from the manuscripts were added to each code. The codes were then analysed to identify major patterns within and across the three cultures, as well as to note down outstanding cases. Particularly, quotes that are regarded as representative to identified patterns or are illustrative of special cases, were highlighted and later included in the findings.

5.6.2 Stage 2: Analysing children’s views

At stage 2, children’s understanding of gender was analysed through each of the pictures presented. Analyses were framed by the questions asked and listed above, to identify key patterns and interesting points in all three cultures. As at stage 1, both representative and worth-noting quotes were highlighted and used to exemplify findings. In addition, links were made at this stage between children’s views and practitioners’ relevant reflections, in order to discuss whether children’s and practitioners’ opinions matched or contradicted each other.

5.6.3 Stage 3: Analysing practitioner-child interactions in ECEC settings

At stage 3, themes were created as emerging from the observational notes, including not only frequently observed aspects but also significant incidences. I used marker pens of different colours to highlight and pick up relevant content in the notes, and then analysed each theme sequentially to identify patterns of how practitioners and children ‘perform’ gender in their daily interactions in different settings in Edinburgh, Hong Kong and Tianjin. Practitioners’ explanations were included when describing certain scenarios and cases, and references were made to practitioners’ and children’s self-reported gender subjectivities in previous chapters. By doing so, observed scenarios and cases could be understood in more contextualised manners; and gaps/consistencies between individuals’ subjective identities and performances were captured.

5.6.4 Stage 4: Cross-cultural analysis

Lastly, at stage 4, all findings were revisited with a particular focus on cross-cultural comparisons. Although such comparisons were already conducted at the other stages, at this stage I wished to summarize from the findings shared and distinctive gender discourses that have shaped practitioners’ and children’s subjectivities and performances in different cultures. I also analysed how data collected using multiple methods and from different perspectives contributed to complementary and comprehensive understanding of the researched area. Those analyses were then used to inform the discussions in *Chapters 10 & 11*.

5.7 Ethical considerations

This research was carried out in three different settings where there may be different ethical principles and even various levels of ethical sensitivities. But since this research is conducted for the fulfilment of a Doctoral degree from a British/Scottish institution, ethical principles as required by the awarding university and its wider academic and political environments were followed, and the study went through the university’s ethical approval process. The Scottish Educational Research Association (SERA) Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research (2005), the revised British Educational Research Association (BERA) Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research (2011), and the SERA Starting Points for Research in Schools (Christie et al., 2007) are among the main ethical guidelines that were referred to in the development of the research study. International policies such as the United Nations’ Convention on the Rights of the

Child (UNCRC) were also key references for international ethical matters in this study. At the same time, ethical requirements from the researched settings and institutions were absolutely respected at both national and school levels. For example, there were differences regarding the rules of taking pictures. In Scotland, I was usually not allowed to take pictures that involve children. Upon request, there were only two pictures taken of the male and/or female practitioners interacting with children in an early years centre. With the centre manager's and practitioners' permissions, the pictures were taken by one of the practitioners using the centre's own camera and were printed out on A4 papers and given to me. In Mainland China and Hong Kong, taking pictures of children's activities and practitioner-child interactions were usually allowed, once permissions were given by the practitioners and school principals. But in all pictures that I took, children's faces were avoided in line with ethical considerations. Other differences regarding ethical processes in the three cultures will also be mentioned in the below aspects.

5.7.1 Gaining access

As noted above, this study was approved by the University of Glasgow's College of Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee in the first place. It further gained approval from the University of Hong Kong²⁸'s Human Research Ethics Committee for Non-Clinical Faculties and the City of Edinburgh Council for accessing local schools in Hong Kong and Edinburgh respectively. No institutional or governmental approvals was required for research in Tianjin, Mainland China. Head teachers/centre managers/school principals from all settings acted as the primary gate keepers and had given their full consent either orally or by signing a consent form after being fully informed. Consultations were then sought from the male and female practitioners to see if they were willing to participate. After they had given their oral permissions, consent forms and information sheets were distributed to the children's parents for their consent, before I started to observe the classrooms. Particularly, in Tianjin, the head teachers thought it was unnecessary and time-consuming to have parents sign the forms; but my visits and research purposes were explained to the parents when they came to drop off/pick up their children and no one raised any objection.

²⁸ Where I was registered as a full-time visiting student during my fieldwork period in Hong Kong.

5.7.2 *Informed consent*

The practitioners' signed consent forms were later obtained when I began my research visits to their classrooms. They were able to ask questions about my research throughout my visits, and were thus well informed. All practitioners were particularly informed that they were free to withdraw or say no to my research, especially the female practitioners who were usually approached after the male practitioners were identified. I have pointed out elsewhere that it had been difficult to find male practitioners and as a result, the female practitioners were usually included because they were working with a male colleague. In Hong Kong where there are only two practitioners in the kindergarten rooms, the only female practitioner that corresponded with the male practitioner was asked to participate in the research; in Tianjin, the situation was similar as the female 'care' practitioners (there are usually 3 practitioners in the classroom altogether) were excluded for equivalence of comparisons (there was only one case where the male practitioner was the 'care' practitioner and the only female class practitioner was included - another class practitioner was on annual leave at the time of my visit); in Edinburgh, there were usually more than one female staff member in the classrooms in addition to a male practitioner. The female practitioners to be involved in my research were therefore identified afterwards, based on their similar ages/working experiences/work responsibilities/nature of work load²⁹ /... to the male practitioners. To make sure that the female practitioners did not feel obligated to be involved, I made it very clear to them that there would by no means be any problem if they chose not to participate. As a matter of fact, all female practitioners in my research (alongside the male practitioners and even head teachers) had expressed their considerable interest in and support of in my study. There was a female practitioner in a kindergarten in Tianjin who was reluctant to participate and therefore that kindergarten was not included.

In addition to practitioners' consent, I have already mentioned that parental consent had been gained before I started my fieldwork in each school. Further consent was then sought from the children themselves. Where the parents refused their children's participation (only a few), I avoided noting down any of the

²⁹ Both being full-time.

children's specific behaviours in the classrooms and did not do the pictorial activities with them. There was a girl in Hong Kong who enquired to do the pictorial activity with me but there was no consent from her parents/carers, I did the activity but had not noted it down or recorded it. Due to limited languages and understandings, most of the younger children were unable to understand what research means and what I was exactly doing. For the older ones I told them that 'research is that I have some questions and I don't know about the answers. I want you to help me find the answers' and asked if they would like to help. With the younger ones I simply asked them if they would like to discuss the three pictures with me. Once they agreed I then explained to them what recording is, saying that 'recording is that our voices will go into this phone/small box, and you will be able to listen to your own voices after we finish our talks.' I asked the children to press the red button on the recorder as a way of giving their consent, after saying that 'if you are happy/agree with that, could you please press the red button for me?' Children were given the opportunities to listen to their own voices after the research activities, as promised. The children's consent was also consistently revisited during the activities, through observations and questions. Some children just left in the middle of the activities, some would start to look around or play with their clothes and/or other objects, and some looked or sounded nervous or uncomfortable in their faces/voices. In the first situation I would just allow the children to go; and in the latter two, I asked the children if they would still like to continue with the activities. If I received a 'no' answer or the children were shaking their heads, I would stop the activities. Some children also asked me questions before or during the activities, and I tried my best to use simple language to help them understand.

Overall, although seeking young children's informed consent turned out to be challenging and difficult (Farrell, 2005; Sargeant & Harcourt, 2012), this research endeavoured to be as ethical as possible by allowing children's flexibilities and reacting to children's non-verbal language throughout the research process. However, I also acknowledge that ethics may be compromised in certain ways in studies with young children, such as that children did not give their own consent for the observations, and that they can never be fully informed due to their limited language articulation and understandings.

5.7.3 Confidentiality

To protect the participants' confidentiality, any information that may lead to identifications of them were avoided in this research, and in any documentation that may be presented to a third party other than the research and the participants. Names of the settings, the practitioners, and the children were all replaced with symbols and/or pseudonyms where necessary. In cases where I sought explanations on what the children had said to me from the practitioners, the children's names were avoided. No child protection issues emerged during the research process, so the widely discussed conflictions between child protection and participants' confidentiality in doing research with children (Farrell, 2005; Tisdall et al., 2009) did not in the end arise in this study.

5.8 The researcher and the research

In defending my selections of methodological frameworks, I have argued that my personal values and experiences may unavoidably have some influences on this research (Bryman, 2012). It has also been recognized that the researcher's own situation in the research, such as his/her gender, class, 'race', and other backgrounds, may sometimes have undeniable significance to studies of this kind (Ramanathan, 2005). By critically reflecting upon the research processes from question formulation, data collection, data analysis, and presentation of findings, I found it particularly worthwhile to point out the below factors on which this research might have been impacted by me as the researcher.

5.8.1 The researcher's gender and the research

Being a male who researches about gender in ECEC with practitioners and young children, my presence appeared to be part of the 'gendered context' in this study. I have already said at the beginning of this thesis that this project was inspired by my own experiences as a 'minority' man who studied and worked in early childhood settings in China and the UK, and this has been frequently used as a 'shortcut' to build up rapport with some of the male practitioners involved in this project. A few Chinese men even said to me that I provided a role model to them, in terms of how they would pursue their career further. I believe such a relationship may have facilitated a good level of trustworthiness when the male practitioners reflected about their experiences of working in ECEC to me, meanwhile admitting that each participant interacted with me in their unique

ways subject to their personalities, ages and otherwise. With female practitioners, I did not interpret any change in their interactional styles with me in relation to my gender, and my interactions with them again varied from one another for other unique contextual reasons. Nevertheless, some psychological studies have noted that experimenters' gender may impact on participants' responses to issues like sex role attitudes in questionnaires (Galla, Frisone, Jeffrey, & Gaer, 1981). Although such notation can hardly be applied to this study due to the completely different methodological nature, it encourages awareness of similar impacts. Williams and Heikes (1993) pointed out that researcher's gender may make some differences in doing in-depth interviews with interviewees. The term 'social desirability bias' was used by them to describe 'the tendency of people to "adjust the truth" so that they sound nicer, richer, and more desirable to the researcher' (p.285) in those situations. Male or female practitioners could have perhaps changed their behaviour to me in order to be interpreted 'favourably' (and would take into account my gender when anticipating what this might be). I also suspect that it may be possible for some of the female practitioners to 'adjust' their answers when they were interviewed about gender issues by a man (me), particularly for those female practitioners in Chinese societies where gender relationships are still assumed to be hierarchical to a certain extent.

Additionally, my gender as a male might have impacted upon my relationships with children and ultimately the research, too. Primarily, my presence in the female-dominated environment may itself have an influence on the children's perceptions of gender, and even more when I interacted with them in their daily activities. Such influences are evident in some children's responses to the pictorial activities, as they sometimes pointed to/referred to me when asked about who are doing certain behaviours in the pictures. Moreover, I noticed that some children may feel reluctant to get close to me or to allow me to approach them, assumingly because of my gender. Vice versa, there were also children who particularly liked me. Indeed, the popularity of my presence in all Mainland Chinese and Hong Kong kindergartens was very noticeable, and was partly attributed to my gender according to the practitioners. In reflecting upon all these responses that I experienced, I thus wonder that, had I been a female, would the children respond to and interact with me in different ways or not? Would it be easier or more difficult for the female researchers to establish rapport with some,

if not all, of the children? The answers to these questions, again, are beyond the capacity of this research. But instead, I treat those children's responses and reactions to me as sources of data about their perceptions of gender, and these data will later be analysed and presented in the findings, where appropriate.

After all, being the only researcher in this project, I am unable to thoroughly reflect on the possible impacts of the researcher's gender. All I can reasonably say is that I am aware of the possibilities and have made available nuances transparent in this thesis.

5.8.2 The researcher's multiple identities and the research

Although not as evident as gender, other facets of my identity may have, to various extents, had some influence on this study. For example, the overwhelming popularity that I sensed in Chinese kindergartens did not happen in any of the Edinburgh centres. But I am not yet sure whether this was down to cultural differences or whether it can be related to my identity as an Asian/Chinese. Similarly, being non-British and being a Chinese Mainlander may possibly have had an influence in the interviews of the practitioners in the three cultures. Archer (2002)'s British Muslim participants in her study have revealed that, they tended to feel more comfortable with an Asian interviewer than with a British white one or others. It might also be the case that some of the practitioners in my study may either feel easier or more cautious while reflecting about their experiences to me. Furthermore, I understood that being a PhD student might also be relevant. Some practitioners from Hong Kong and Mainland China may sometimes ask me to comment on their practices in their daily teaching and caring, or seek confirmation from me for their answers to certain questions during the interviews. I was somehow seen as an 'expert' in this field of ECEC to them, which possibly put some pressure on them. Nevertheless, while acknowledging these nuances, I am not able to recognise any specific instance that may have compromised the validity of research. I would also claim that, as a subjective human who has inevitably been involved throughout the research process, my gender, nationality and other individual characteristics, may have intertwined with each other to add to the dynamics and complexities of the research process. To further refer to Archer (2002)'s study, the female Asian interviewer was even more welcomed by the interviewees because of her gender. My multiple identities may have

intersectionally made some differences in terms of how the participants react to me in different contexts and cultures, although not necessarily significant enough to ‘impede’ the project.

5.8.3 The researcher and the three cultures

Lastly, the comparative nature of this study is significantly related to my own experiences with the three cultures, as well as my other intercultural experiences and skills. In comparative studies of this kind, familiarities of the researcher with the compared cultures are deemed to be importantly relevant (Philips & Schweisfurth, 2014). I used the frameworks of Research circumstances and potential responses and Researcher skills and perspectives developed by Philips and Schweisfurth (2014) to argue how I am competent in conducting this study and how the study is thus not necessarily and/or considerably impaired. The Mainland Chinese culture is obviously my home culture, where I grew up and was educated before postgraduate level. I then studied in the UK (both England and Scotland) since 2010 and am increasingly becoming familiarized with its cultures and education systems. Hong Kong is deemed to have Chinese cultural heritage and to follow British education systems (Zhang, 1998), hence it is a place that I became quite easily familiarized with. At the same time, all three contexts are also to some extent ‘strange’ to me. For instance, I have been away from China for a number of years and am unfamiliar with the recent developments of ECEC there; it turned out that kindergartens in Tianjin have changed in many aspects and are quite different from what I had experienced in the past with Chinese kindergartens. I do not live in Edinburgh and before I started my research fieldwork, I only paid a one-day visit to a nursery class in Glasgow. And I had never visited Hong Kong until this project. Subsequently, I regard myself as in a good balance between ‘making the familiar strange’ and ‘making the strange familiar’, which appears to be a reasonable position in pursuing this study (Alexander, 2000; Philips & Schweisfurth, 2014).

5.9 Summary

In summary, this chapter has explained how and why a qualitative methodology and methods were chosen and implemented in this study, so that the aims of examining gendered practitioner-child interactions in early childhood settings, of exploring practitioners’ and children’s perceptions on them, and of understanding

the wider cultures, could be properly met. I further discussed how the research processes and findings could be enhanced or compromised by a variety of factors in this project, such as the limitations of sampling, children's individualities, and my experiences and subjectivities as a researcher. In the chapters that follow, presentations of findings on practitioner-child interactions; interpretations by practitioners and children on such interactions, and how their interpretations could inform about cultural understandings, will be explored.

Chapter 6 Contextualizing the research: gender and men's participation in ECEC settings in Scotland, Hong Kong, and Mainland China

This chapter will, before moving on to present the main findings of this research, provide details about macro- and micro-contextual information regarding gender and men's participation in ECEC settings in Scotland, Hong Kong, and Mainland China; so as to provide a richer context for understanding the findings. It draws on both literature that is specific to the researched contexts, and information gained in my own research (for example, through political documents [i.e. United Nations Human Development Report, curriculum frameworks, governmental reports], social media, and formal and informal talks with participants and non-participant stakeholders that I came across during my visits to those ECEC settings). There will be quick introductions to prevailing gender attitudes and educational values in Scottish and Chinese societies, followed by more specific descriptions of gender balance and men's participation in ECEC. All those aspects are deemed to be relevant in understanding gender and practitioner-child interactions in this study, and will be consistently referred to when findings are presented in later chapters.

6.1 Gender at a glance in Scotland, Hong Kong, and Mainland China

In searching for research literature that would be able to embrace the complexities of gender in Scottish and Chinese cultures, it seems that little is as straightforward as any single piece of article can tell, and that to provide holistic pictures of gender complexities and dynamics is massive work beyond this current project. There is also much diversity within each cultural setting and so generalisations are cautioned throughout this dissertation - especially re China, where development is uneven across a huge landmass and population. Therefore, this section will only touch upon some indicative, and to various extent superficial information in regards to gender situations in Scotland, Hong Kong, and Mainland China. For instance, the Human Development Reports published by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) every year include Gender Development Index (GDI) and Gender Inequality Index (GII), which indicate female to male ratios in terms of aspects such as life expectancy at birth, years and levels of schooling/education, economic incomes and labour force participation, and many others. The most recent report published in 2016 by UNDP shows that Hong Kong and the United Kingdom were ranked No. 12 and No.16 respectively out of about

190 countries or territories for GDI and GII, being categorized as very high human development countries or territories (UNDP, 2016). (Mainland) China was ranked No. 90 as a high human development country (ibid). Although far from drawing any conclusions from these numbers, it appears that Hong Kong and the UK are relatively, as a whole, more positive in gender equity than Mainland China.

Shifting from international indicators to national and regional policy and legislation, it appears that political agenda in Scotland, Hong Kong and Mainland China have all addressed gender equality as a significant issue. For example, The Scottish Government (n.d.a) state that ‘no one should be denied rights or opportunities because of their gender’. There are explicit policies and legislation that deal with gender inequalities in aspects such as increasing childcare provision, ensuring fairer workplaces for women, working with fathers and particularly, promoting training and recruitment for men in the early years childcare workforce (ibid). In Hong Kong, the government’s focus on gender equality is evident via the Women’s Commission (WoC). Following the global strategy of gender mainstreaming that ‘is the integration of gender perspectives and needs in legislation, policies or programmes, in any area and at all levels’, WoC in Hong Kong developed a Gender Mainstreaming Checklist to ensure that gender equality is promoted (WoC, 2015; further details on gender mainstreaming policy in Hong Kong can be found via http://www.lwb.gov.hk/Gender_Mainstreaming/eng/main.html). In President Xi’s Report at the 19th CPC National Congress, 2017, he emphasized that China will persist to Gender Equality as a basic state policy and protect women’s and children’s rights and welfare (XinHua, 2017). Aspects that are addressed through various policies and legal documents in China consist of women’s poverty, education, health, pregnancy, employment and many more (Women’s Voices, 2017). In alliance with the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5 to ‘achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls’ (United Nations, 2015), a political discourse of achieving gender equality is embraced in all three researched contexts.

Despite the strong political discourse of gender equality (which is arguably underpinned by the discourse of gender binaries), however, political drives to promote gender diversity that extends beyond the binary, heterosexual genders

in those three societies seem to vary. The Scottish Transgender Alliance's Equal Recognition campaign 2014 calls for 'the introduction of legal recognition for people who do not identify as male or female (non-binary)' (Scottish Government, n.d.b), and same-sex marriage became legal in this country in the same year. By contrast, in the Chinese societies of both Hong Kong and Mainland China, gender diversity and LGBTQ+ rights are rarely mentioned in policies or legal documents, and neither is same-sex marriage legal there. Gender diversity in this regard is passively reflected in Chinese political agenda in parallel to increasingly emerging movements and activists that fight for LGBTQ+ rights and diversity (Kong, 2016).

Stella, Flynn, & Gawlewicz (2017) have argued that gender and sexual norms are inscribed in law and policy. As such, they found that Scottish law and policy were perceived by LGBT Eastern European migrants in Scotland to be normalising sexual diversity and thus promoting broader inclusion and equality in the society. In reviewing homosexual studies in Chinese sociology, Kong (2016) also noted that development in this field has been shaped by political (and cultural) considerations at different historical moments, alluding to the possible impacts that current silence in Chinese policies might have on wider social equality and diversity among LGBTQ+ groups. The different political contexts in Scotland and China, will thus lay the contextual foundations for this current research. For example, I tend to see some boys and girls who cross gender-boundaries in their dressings in the centres I visited in Edinburgh, and these were accepted and supported by both the children's practitioners and parents according to the participants' feedback. Such incidences were hardly observed in Hong Kong or Tianjin kindergartens though, and both Hong Kong and Tianjin participants pointed out that such behaviours would be 'corrected' by parents and practitioners should they take place. Acknowledging that the few cases of gender-crossing observed among Scottish children and the invisibility of it in Chinese kindergartens in this research are far from claiming any generalisations to this topic, it is somehow indicative that Scotland is more acceptable of gender diversity and alternative presentations of gender than the Chinese societies reflecting the respective political environments.

In addition to policies and laws, gender cultures as nested in reports and empirical literature in the three contexts are also helpful in understanding the research

findings in my study. Despite the Scottish government's efforts to tackle gender inequalities, a report shows that a significant portion of women in Scotland are still in less privileged positions comparing to men (Engender, 2014). Particularly relevant to this study are that 62% of unpaid carers are women in Scotland, that every 13 minutes a woman in Scotland experiences violence, and that gender stereotyping is still a big issue in many ways like women's roles as carers (ibid). Even more relevant, Wingrave's (2016) study on gender perceptions of early years practitioners in Scotland found that dimorphic understanding of gender is prevalent among her participants. Despite self-claiming that their practices were 'gender-free', those Scottish early years practitioners' gender perceptions seem to be affected by 'nature versus nurture' arguments about gender and they believe that gender is either innate or learned (from parents).

Whereas Hong Kong ranked quite highly in international reports for gender development and equality, it is still deemed to be a paternal-oriented society where men are ascribed higher status, privileges, and esteem (Chan, 2014). Women are still prescribed more towards domestic roles and full-time housewives and child carers are not unusual among the children's mothers in the kindergartens I visited. According to Kwok & Wu (2015) and Ng & Ma (2004), Chinese in Hong Kong's (which account for about 92% of Hong Kong population according to the government's 2016 Population By-census [Census and Statistics Department, Hong Kong SAR, 2017]) cultural values are predominantly shaped by a combination of traditional Confucianism, Western Christianity, and human rights values. The former two, as Ng and Ma (2004) suggest, both place men's dominant role over women in Hong Kong society (see discussion of Confucianism below). With regard to Christianity, its main ideology entails to heterosexual, monogamous and life-long marriage (Kwok & Wu, 2015). Due to the influence of Britain as a coloniser, Christian concepts of gender and sexual roles are persistent as dominant doctrines in Hong Kong society (Ng & Ma, 2004; Kwok & Wu, 2015), subordinating homosexuality and prohibiting broader gender diversity and equity. Christian attitudes on gender are similar to Chinese Confucianism and the two ideologies perhaps reinforce each other in shaping prevailing gender attitudes in Hong Kong.

Confucianism is claimed to have deep-rooted influences on both Hong Kong and Mainland Chinese cultures according to academic literature (Ng & Ma, 2004; Kwok

& Wu, 2015; Yu, Xiao, & Xiang, 2011; Shen & D'Ambrosio, n.d.). The Confucius ideology of gender is heavily embraced through the dichotomous cosmology of *yin* and *yang* (analogies to female and male) and focuses on dissimilarities between men and women in accordance with their physical differences (Shen & D'Ambrosio, n.d.). The Chinese gender norms based on this philosophy thus represent a powerful heterosexual discourse - for example, 'both men and women are expected to get married upon coming of age'; 'the more sons, the more blessings'; and 'there are three forms of unfilial conducts, of which the worst is to have no descendants' (Yu, Xiao, & Xiang, 2011, p.264). The subordination of hegemonic masculinity over femininity and other forms of gender varieties, forms a strong hierarchy between men and others in Chinese gender culture. This culture is reflected in Chinese ECEC as public concerns over boys' 'crisis of masculinity'; and as I have argued elsewhere (Xu & Waniganayake, 2017) that the Chinese intention to increase men's participation in ECEC suggests a culture of persistent 'masculinity admiration' in the society.

To summarize here, although all three cultures in this research demonstrate their respective efforts to address gender inequalities, the ideology of gender equality seems to be underpinned by a shared binary thinking of gender (as discussed in *Chapter 2*). Beyond that, cultural and political attitudes towards gender diversity vary from Scottish to Chinese societies. With the former exhibiting a more inclusive agenda to promote gender diversity, the Confucius-affected Hong Kong and Mainland Chinese societies tend to marginalize and disadvantage non-heterosexual forms of gender. Whilst those patterns are noted, this research is also aware of contemporary gender reforms that take place worldwide (UNICEF, 2017). From my poststructural perspective, societies including even China would have their own agency in subverting over dominant gender discourses.

6.2 Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) at a glance in Scotland, Hong Kong, and Mainland China

Internationally, the power of neuroscience and economic science has shaped ECEC as a key stage of child development, as the best preparation for children's academic achievements and social life in later years, and as vital for increasing human capitals and thriving labour markets of societies (Georgeson, Payler, & Campbell-Barr, 2013; Peeters et al., 2015). Such perspectives are also reflected

in ECEC policies and curricula in Scotland, Hong Kong, and Mainland China (Rao & Li, 2009; Zhu, 2009; Campbell-Barr, Leeson, & Ho, 2013; Payler, Georgeson, & Wickett, 2013), and contribute at different levels to practitioners' perceptions of ECEC in this research.

According to those practitioners that I interviewed in Edinburgh, nurseries and early years centres have strong focuses on childcare and on children's social and emotional developments. These focuses are in alignment with the National Practice Guidance on Early Learning and Childcare: Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014. According to it, children are expected to have good social experiences, to gain confidence and self-esteem, and to have fun through play; particularly if they come from deprived family backgrounds (Scottish Government, 2014). Some practitioners also regarded pre-school education as a preparation for schools, and academic learning is minimally integrated into play and free activities (ibid). Since most of the settings that I visited were in deprived areas and many of the children's families have various social problem such as domestic violence, alcohol and drug abuses, and unemployment, supporting both the families and children to survive those issues is placed as most important. The only private nursery that I visited in an affluent area, offered extra Spanish and drama classes for children which are paid by their parents; reflecting some parents' expectations of their children having a 'better start'. Such activities, according to Reay, Davies, David, and Ball (2001), are among the ways in which middle-class parents maintain class advantage through the development of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986).

In Hong Kong, kindergartens are all privately run by for-profit or not-for-profit communities and are considerably driven by market forces with parents as consumers and providers endeavouring to meet parents' needs³⁰ (Campbell-Barr et al., 2013). Therefore, kindergartens in Hong Kong are strongly academic-oriented as required by parents and in preparation for primary education (Ho, 2009). In the five local kindergartens where I did my fieldwork, children had to take Mandarin and English classes and do exercises in textbooks every day on numbers and literacy. Although the majority of practitioners expressed that they would hope children to have more fun and play at this age, the high expectations

³⁰ Free 15 years education including ECEC is implemented from 2017.

from parents forced most kindergartens to spend a significant amount of time on academic learning every day. Practitioners also mentioned purposes like caring, love, discipline, respect, social experiences and so on of ECEC, which include a combination of traditional and contemporary educational values.

Similarly, kindergartens in Mainland China also emphasize academic achievements and preparations for primary schools. However, such emphases have started to decrease in some areas like Tianjin, where local policies (*Measures to the Implementation of Monitoring and Evaluating Operational Behaviours in Tianjin Kindergartens [2017-2020]*) have forbidden kindergartens from ‘schoolifications’ (Zhang, 2017). Practitioners that I interviewed said that many parents still want their children to be taught academic studies in kindergartens, and even send their children to extra tutorials out of school time (class differences were not noted in my research though). To what extent the conflicts between governmental requirements of ‘deschoolificationizing’ kindergarten education, and parental expectations of their children’s academic preparations for primary education will be resolved in Tianjin and other parts of Mainland China is subject to further investigation and is beyond the capacity of this research. Additionally, the *Guideline to the Learning and Development of Children Aged 3-6* launched by Chinese Ministry of Education in 2012 has become a powerful force in framing philosophies and pedagogies of Chinese ECEC, and is frequently referred to by my Chinese participant practitioners when talking about their understandings of ECEC. The *Guideline* reflects a core educational value of ‘child-centredness’ at political level and wishes to provide ‘scientific’ guidance on children’s learning and development through play and experiences in areas including health, language, social skills, science, and arts (Ministry of Education of the PRC, 2012). There were reported difficulties by head teachers of some kindergartens that I went to though, in terms of the training of practitioners and especially of those more experienced practitioners who have entrenched teaching values of traditional ‘teacher-centredness’. Again, it is not the purpose of this research to explore further on the topic here.

ECEC in Scotland, Hong Kong and Mainland China reveals some similarities concerning its purposes and objectives at political and societal levels, and meanwhile, each system has its uniqueness and different cultures. This research

will take them into consideration throughout when analysing and reporting research findings.

6.3 Gender balance and men's participation in ECEC in Scotland, Hong Kong, and Mainland China

I have already illustrated in the introduction of this research (*Chapter 1*) that gender imbalance in ECEC workforce is a global phenomenon, with few men currently working in ECEC with particularly young children in the vast majority of countries like Scotland and China. There also seem to be world-wide expectations that men are needed in ECEC for gender equality and diversity and as male role models for boys, as previously discussed in *Chapters 3&4*. In addition, Scottish and Chinese cultures have embedded their distinctive discourses in regards to men's participation in ECEC. For instance, in Edinburgh, men are encouraged by Scottish Government and City of Edinburgh Council to become early years practitioners/child carers in order to show the children men can be nice and caring persons, and to provide children with appropriate experiences with men. To achieve this, the government has funded a Men in Childcare project that provides men with free and specialised training pathways into the profession (see <http://www.meninchildcare.co.uk/>). Earlier in this chapter, there are statistics indicating that women are highly possibly experiencing violence by men in Scotland, and it was also reported in my research that many families in the deprived areas of Edinburgh have various social issues including domestic violence (usually by men) and single-parent. According to Scotland Census 2011, 92% of single parents are mothers in Scotland (National Records of Scotland, 2011 cited by One Parent Families Scotland [OPFS], n.d.) and those women raising children without fathers present/permanently in the home often live in poverty (OPFS Web, 2017) (and often there are difficulties in getting the fathers to pay child support as well). Some children thus have no or bad experiences with men in their life, which is of significant concern by the government. Consequently, Men in Childcare as an accreditation charity to encourage men to work in childcare was founded in 2001. Funded by Edinburgh City Council and the Scottish Government, Men in Childcare has since then been a major drive in the increase of men's participation in ECEC in Edinburgh and Scotland.

In recent years in Mainland China, there are particular concerns by the general public and media towards the ‘crisis’ of boys, who are criticized of being lack of masculinity and increasingly feminised (Yang & McNair, 2017). Many provinces in the developed east coast districts, such as Jiangsu and Fujian Provinces, have launched provincial policies to offer free university education to male students studying for a major in ECEC (Jiangsu Education, 2014; MENTEACH, 2015), so as to encourage more men into this field. In Tianjin where this research is conducted, although no governmental policies are implemented to attract more men, numbers of male kindergarten teachers (practitioners) have increased considerably in the past few years according to my personal experiences from 2013 to 2015. Two major reasons are found to be contributing to this increase of men in Tianjin kindergartens: 1. Men are expected to be better at physical activities than women, and physical sports are deemed to be of great importance for children’s health, and particularly for boys’ development of masculinity. Many kindergartens in Tianjin have recruited men as PE teachers only, according to information gathered during my recruitment process; 2. The increasingly competitive job market in China makes working as a kindergarten teacher (practitioner) a relatively satisfactory job, especially in state-run kindergartens with a *bianzhi*³¹. Male practitioners are more likely to be found in state-run kindergartens due to job steadiness and better welfares; and in some sub-urban areas of Tianjin where academic backgrounds are not essential for becoming a kindergarten teacher (practitioner), some men who studied management, engineering, and other majors at university even chose to work in state-run kindergartens after taking an examination to gain practitioners’ qualifications.

Lastly in Hong Kong, men’s participation in ECEC is regarded as an emerging phenomenon (Ho & Lam, 2014) and some believe that men are particularly needed in local kindergartens for promoting among children more physical exercises to maintain a healthy childhood. Practitioners I interviewed in one particular kindergarten explained that due to limited spaces in local kindergartens and lack of large enough playgrounds, Hong Kong children are unable to do sufficient exercises and are easier to get sick at kindergarten ages. As a result, male practitioners are sometimes expected to undertake all PE classes in the

³¹ *Bianzhi* is a Chinese terminology for tenure, and is adopted in state-run organizations and companies. Usually a job with *bianzhi* will mean steadiness and better welfares.

kindergartens and to maximise children's physical exercises. Although no governmental policies have been introduced in Hong Kong to attract more men to work in ECEC, there is a sign from academic literature that men's participation is desired for improving the quality and professional status of ECEC (Ho & Lam, 2014).

Literature has suggested that the reasons why men are reluctant to work in ECEC internationally include that it is usually stigmatized as a women's job bonded with childcare, that it is often lowly paid, and that men who work in ECEC are highly likely to be suspected of child protection concerns (see *Chapter 4, Section 4.1.2*). Despite those factors being still relevant in preventing men from working in ECEC, as reflected by almost all participant practitioners in all three cultures in this study; it is also evident from this research that there are some other social factors that could possibly boost men's participation in ECEC in Scotland, Hong Kong, and Mainland China (see *Chapter 7*). Moreover, there might also be variations among individual male practitioners who already work in ECEC in the above-named societies, in terms of how they construct their professional subjectivities as ECEC practitioners. The following chapters will therefore, expand on how individual male practitioners in my research, together with their female counterparts, reflected upon their subjectivities of working as ECEC practitioners in Edinburgh, Hong Kong, and Tianjin Cities respectively.

6.4 Summary

To summarize, this chapter has provided information on societal and political attitudes towards gender and ECEC in Scotland, Hong Kong and Mainland China. It also illustrated social and cultural discourses that shape and situate men's participation in ECEC in the three researched cultures. The coming chapters will thus report findings of this research with references to those contextualisations.

Chapter 7 Male and female practitioners' gender subjectivities working in ECEC in Scotland, Hong Kong, and Mainland China

This chapter will explore male and female practitioners' gender subjectivities, as of relevance to working in ECEC with children.

7.1 Selecting ECEC as a career

It seems that for most Scottish practitioners that I interviewed, both men and women, pre-job experiences with children were a main motivation for them to work in ECEC. This includes experiences looking after relatives' or neighbours' children, doing voluntary jobs in schools, and raising up their own children. However, a gender division is noted here in terms of how such experiences have influenced women and men practitioners' career trajectories. 6 (out of 7) of the women practitioners were intrigued by the experiences and chose to work with young children as their career (one of them worked in a Café first before shifting to ECEC). By contrast, none of the seven Scottish men had chosen ECEC as their first job. Two ended up working with older children as support workers and later decided to work with younger children due to personal interests. Being dissatisfied with their previous jobs as manufacturers, a telephone operator, or a pension officer, the other five men changed their career to ECEC because of either their perceived fitness in working with young children by others, or their positive experiences in raising their own children. It thus suggests that on the one hand, men are less likely to select ECEC as a primary career in Scotland despite their interests in interacting with young children, and external encouragements might play a significant role in persuading them into the workforce. On the other hand, Scottish men might have limited experiences with young children before they have their own babies, making it less possible for men to consider working in ECEC in their early life. As Laura, a female nursery practitioner from Falm Early Years Centre pointed out, 'men would not know if they are good at ECEC jobs or not if they have limited access to children.'

Conversely, some male practitioners from Hong Kong and Tianjin reflected that they were actively seeking a career in ECEC as a result of the increasing popularity of men's participation in ECEC in the two cultures. Taking advantage of their gender, men are believed to find it easier to secure a position in Chinese

kindergartens. In particular, a few men ended up in ECEC because of their expertise/qualifications gained in physical activities, which is deemed to be a key drive for the Chinese societies to increase men's involvement in ECEC. Ms Bao, a female practitioner from Chenchen *youeryuan* in Tianjin, has a PE major and also has expertise in children's physical sports. Although she took advantage of this non-traditional characteristic (Yang & McNair, 2017) in becoming a practitioner, her main motivations to work in ECEC entailed gendered Chinese cultures - she followed her husband to Tianjin after getting married and being a practitioner allows her more flexibilities in looking after her own child. Similarly, Alice from Edinburgh indicated that she used to work as a childminder at home, in order to take care of her own children. Ms Bao and Alice's perspectives reveal a traditional value across the globe that kindergarten education is an extension of mothering (Press, 2015). Referring back to the pervasiveness of women as primary child carers in Chinese and Scottish societies mentioned in Chapter 6 - but meanwhile acknowledging that it is not possible to infer from this research whether or not ECEC is still pervasively regarded as extension of mothering in China and Scotland - it is indicative here that women's perceived 'natural' mothering instincts remains a vital stated reason for the gender imbalance in ECEC (ibid).

In addition, Mrs Nie from Beiguan *youeryuan* was advised to work as a practitioner by her parents, who regarded this job as suitable for women. In traditional Chinese culture, teaching (especially in the early years and primary education) is widely deemed to be a suitable job for women because: 1. Women are regarded as caring and meticulous, which are characteristics required when working with children and young people; 2. Practitioners (teachers) have about 3 months' holidays every year, and are believed to be a less busy job. Therefore, women will have more time to look after their families if they work as practitioners. Again, although far from generalisations in this research, Mrs Nie's experience reflected to a limited extent, the links between women's domestic roles and their career orientations in Chinese culture.

Chinese practitioners (both men and women) from Tianjin and Hong Kong also reflected that pre-job experiences with children and personal interests in interacting with children were important motivations for them to work as practitioners. Other reasons may include encouragements from families and

friends, childhood experiences, preference for a more ‘innocent’ environment working with children (that the relationships with children are much simpler than with adults), coincidences and family circumstances. In these regards, there were no gender differences between how men and women Chinese practitioners made their career choices. For example, both a man and a woman practitioner from Hong Kong described how their unhappiness in childhood inspired them to work with young children, to ‘support them [young children] and make them happy in their early years of life’. That said, it is argued that the majority of Chinese men from Hong Kong and Tianjin in this research challenged gender stereotypes of Chinese society by claiming their love of children as a main motivator in seeking to work in ECEC. Those men also embodied to some extent, characteristics of traditional femininity when they claimed that working with children is ‘innocent’, considering the connections between the notions of femininity and childhood with the realm of the private, sweetness, kindness and nurturing (Walkerdine, 1989).

7.2 Coping with social stigmas

When asked about why few men choose to work in ECEC, male and female practitioners across the three cultures discursively agreed that social stigmas contribute a significant part. Men being socially expected to be the main breadwinners of the family home and women socially expected to be the primary child carers as a result of their perceived greater role in reproduction (presumably through childbirth, breastfeeding etc.), were the most frequently cited attributes by almost all participants. Although some practitioners also acknowledged that such gender arrangements have changed to a certain extent in contemporary society, the historically rooted gender stratification of social roles is still perceived by most participants as holding many men back in relation to work in ECEC. Associated with the widely held perception of ECEC as a ‘woman’s job’, there are also suspicions towards men who work in ECEC settings regarding child protection issues (the media-driven representations of men being paedophiles were reported to be pervasive in all three cultures), men’s suitability for and ability in relation to caring (the discourse of genetic difference as influencing prescribed gender roles was still deemed to be undeniable by many interviewees), and men’s capacities of supporting their families (specifically in Chinese societies). The majority of practitioners from Edinburgh, Hong Kong, and Tianjin complained that the ECEC workforce is lowly paid, especially if compared to primary and

secondary school teachers. Meanwhile, they believed that their workload is extremely high, dealing with highly demanding children and the level of required paperwork. In China, social pressures on men to buy houses and cars for their families make practitioners always very unattractive choices, and there were reported cases told by the participants that male practitioners were declined permission for marriage by their girlfriends' parents due to their low wages and 'unpromising' future. Below are some selected quotes reflecting all those attributes:

Men are the main breadwinners in Hong Kong households. They have to earn more and to support the family. Kindergarten teachers' salaries are too low for men to feed the whole family. You [men] can only do this job if your parents are working, and you don't have to support a whole family.

(Ms Woo, Female, Yan Oi Church Kindergarten, Hong Kong)

I feel that the salary is not sufficient for your daily expenses, especially if you just start to work as a kindergarten teacher. You might earn more when you work longer, but then you also get old. If you still work as a kindergarten teacher when you are 30, as a man, others will judge you.

(Mr Chin, Male, HKTA Tuen Wan Kindergarten, Hong Kong)

Here Mr Chin is linking expected incomes of Chinese men to age, which reflects Chinese Confucianism that men need to get married and settle down to a (well-paid) job before or by 30 - (partially) explaining why Chinese men practitioners recruited in this study are predominantly below 30 (see *Tables 5-2 & 5-3*).

I think a lot of men don't go into this job simply because of the wages, if they have children. That's my personal [thought], I've known some guys they say they would love to do that but can't live on that. If you have a child who attends school and [.....] it's not enough to pay bills and bring up a family. It's very very difficult. Unless you've got some financial stability behind you.

(Amy, Female, Crewkerne Primary School Nursery Class, Edinburgh)

Gavin: I think first of all we still have got prejudice, that sort of men are breadwinner, financially. If you speak to anyone in this company the wage is shit comparing to the job that you do, in general, in private sector. There is still expectation I suppose where the male person has to be the breadwinner, get the bigger wage.

Researcher: You still think of that?

Gavin: For me personally my wife and I are fairly equal. We have a similar wage, we both wash dishes, we both make tea. There is no difference in the gender, but I don't know if that's so widespread. I would say in my

generation, we are much more like an equal society, but I don't know if older generations... maybe still a little bit stuck in their way.

(Gavin, Male, Section Five Nursery, Edinburgh)

Again, Gavin pointed to the possible intersection between gender and age (generation) in shaping individuals' gender subjectivities in Scotland. Based on Gavin and other participants' quotes on men's and women's expected social roles, there are both continuity and change in terms of gender perceptions in Scottish culture (Bray & Koo, 2004; Tobin et al., 2009).

Although men and women are equal, I still think men have more pressures than women in our society. [If men want to get married], many will ask: 'Do you own a house? Do you own a car?' So men have pressures in these aspects. It is also to do with the nature of this job. It requires caring and meticulousness. The society widely regard women to be more meticulous than men.

(Miss Tai, Female, Kuaile *youeryuan*, Tianjin)

I just think all these allegations that made, and the stories you read about paedophiles you know, that sort of stuff and pressure, that can put men off. There is a lot of pressure from that.

(Carl, Male, Falm Early Years Centre, Edinburgh)

If honest, because of media and the sort of media coverage of child abuse in the past 15 years. I think that's first of all comes about. Even if I'm just in the pub with someone and they ask me what I do, I say I work with 3-4 years olds, they will make a joke about it. So people might be suspicious that I am one of those predators, but personally this doesn't bother me.

(Sean, Male, Guild Early Years Centre, Edinburgh)

The suspicions from parents and other colleagues. [...] I tell you something I should not be saying. I did not need to be on duty before [in the children's napping room]. The head teacher wants to protect me, but also is afraid of complaints from parents. Because children might need to use the toilet when they wake up, and it is regarded as inconvenient if it is a man teacher. I can sense that some people do not trust me.

(Mr Niu, Beiguan *youeryuan*, Tianjin)

Whilst the majority of participants acknowledged these social stigmas that societies may hold towards men's participation in ECEC, male practitioners in this research illustrated both similarly and differently, how they cope with those stigmas from both societal and individual perspectives. Scottish practitioners,

particularly those who work in early years centres (settings that are geared towards support for children from disadvantaged families, some of whom may have violent fathers or no fathers. See *Chapter 6*), all mentioned their significance as ‘male role models’ for children in justifying their necessity in an environment that employs mostly women. Similarly, some practitioners from Hong Kong and Tianjin emphasized their roles as equivalent to fathers within the Chinese context of calling for fathers’ involvement in child rearing. Mainland Chinese practitioners particularly pointed to their sense of mission to rescue boys’ from ‘feminisation’ and an accompanying perceived lack of masculinity. For example, one participant said that

The boys are feminized nowadays. [...] [They] cry a lot, as soon as they come across difficulties. This is to do with mothering or grandparenting. As far as I know, many children’s dads are working away from home long-term. The mothers can be overprotective.

(Mr Niu, Beiguan *youeryuan*, Tianjin)

I will present more of participants’ understandings of ‘male role models’ later in this chapter. Here it is noted that both Scottish and Chinese men referred to their complementary roles working in a predominantly female workforce, although such roles may be perceived in different ways from culture to culture.

In responding to child protection issues, Scottish practitioners generally cited their teacher training qualifications which are no different by gender, as well as the importance of institutional supports, when occasionally some parents were reluctant for the men practitioners to look after their children (and particularly to change their children’s nappy). Two men in particular mentioned their roles as fathers who raised up their own daughters, which they believed significantly reduced parents’ suspicions and gained their trust. Whereas, almost all Chinese men practitioners said that they had to be very careful about intimate contacts with children and to avoid changing girls’ nappies or taking girls to toilets. Furthermore, the gender stereotype that men are less capable of caring due to a perceived genetic ‘nature’ prevents most Chinese male practitioners from working with younger children in the early years, both by external perceptions and through an internalization of this discourse themselves. Men are less likely to work with Chinese children aged below 3-4 who are assumed to be requiring more care, and are usually designated to work with older children for the educational sides of

ECEC. Even some male practitioners themselves showed their lack of confidence in caring roles in this research. For instance, Mr Cheung and Mr Hu claimed that:

Before I started working here, I believed I am relatively meticulous. However, comparing to Ms Woo, I feel like I still have a lot to learn. For example, [...] [w]e need to pay attention to children's different needs. She [Ms Woo] is much better than me at doing this. Women are more meticulous than men.

(Mr Cheung, Male, Yan Oi Church Kindergarten, Hong Kong)

Women possess those qualities that are fundamental for working with young children, such as love, patience - that sort of mother love. Although I possess those qualities, they are not as obvious as possessed by women. I tend to only focus on the key things at work, but can forget about many small things. [...] Women are meticulous and can finish work step by step, whereas I always forget about one or a few things.

(Mr Hu, Male, Xiwang *youeryuan*, Tianjin)

The gender stratification within the Chinese ECEC workforce however, was not evident in the Scottish settings that I visited. Most Scottish practitioners stressed gender equity in shared responsibilities as well as team working. Two male practitioners, Carl and Philip, countered the discourse of men being less able to 'care' by recalling their own childhood experiences of being brought up among female figures and of lacking male figures - experiences that they believed have brought out their 'feminine' side. It seems that Carl and Philip perceived 'caring' as a kind of latent biological capacity all men have but that it needs a particular 'feminine' environment to 'bring it out'.

Lastly, the economic pressures that men and women may suffer when working in ECEC were also responded to differently by my participants and particularly, by male participants in contexts of the common economic reasons cited in the literature for men not being attracted to ECEC (Peeters, 2013; Yang & McNair, 2017). Those who work in Scottish early years centres as early years officers were generally satisfied with their salaries, as it is regarded as a well-paid position due to the nature of the job working with children with special educational needs and/or from families with multiple issues. On the contrary, private nurseries were described as 'money-making machines' by participants who worked in this kind of institution. But Philip said that he is content with his salary as he enjoyed the happiness from his work. This compromise of financial status by job satisfaction

was also agreed by John, who worked in a primary school nursery class. And he further explained that the compromise was also based upon his current family circumstances that his wife and himself have paid off the majority of their house mortgage after long periods of work. Gavin, who worked in a private nursery as deputy manager might have a better financial situation, and he revealed a shared financial responsibility between his partner and himself in the household. A similar institutional difference is also observed in Tianjin, where working on a permanent contract in public kindergartens is increasingly regarded as a relatively well-paid job. This was why a majority of male practitioners tend to be found in public kindergartens in this city, and were to various extents satisfied with their wages and job steadiness. Although ECEC is still regarded as a lowly-paid job in Mainland China and elsewhere (Peeters, 2013; Yang & McNair, 2017), this research reflects a tendency (at least) specific to the Mainland Chinese context that men become more likely to work in ECEC as joint results of the increasingly competitive job market and the gender advantage of men seeking employment in ECEC. At the same time, as four (out of five) Mainland Chinese male practitioners that I interviewed were in their early 20s, just starting their career and yet establishing families, it is hard for them to predict whether or not financial concerns will be an issue in the future. Such uncertainties could also be applied to the four male practitioners in Hong Kong, who were in their 20s, too. Of the rest one male practitioner from Tianjin, Mr Hu, is married and has a child, and his wife is also working with a tenure in a public kindergarten like himself. He thus felt less anxious about financial problems, considering that both members of a couple holding state-funded tenure jobs is regarded as a 'privilege' in Mainland Chinese society. Mr Hu's situation also reflects another trend in Mainland Chinese society, that of men and women becoming joint wage earners in the family home. Mr Fok from Hong Kong is also married with a child, and his current salary was quite satisfactory due to his long experience working in this field. He suggested that his specialisation in sports and the consistent support and progression opportunities provided by the principal/institution are important factors for him to remain in this field.

In the contexts of changing gender perceptions and increasing importance of ECEC in all three cultures, male and female practitioners in this study were optimistic about men's participation in the industry. Some societal factors such as social

issues in Scotland (such as domestic violence in some areas - see *Chapter 6* for details), difficulties in the Chinese job market, and concerns about boys' development of masculinity in Mainland China, are already pushing some men to work in ECEC; whereas other social stigmas like child protection concerns, financial pressures, and gender stereotypes of men's and women's roles, prevent many men from choosing ECEC as a career or remaining in this field.

7.3 Working in ECEC

This research also reflected both similar and different ways of how individual practitioners perceive their job in this research, having chosen to work in the ECEC workforce. All practitioners, regardless of their cultural backgrounds or gender, expressed that they enjoyed interacting and building up relationships with children. This enjoyment could be related to the perceived innocence of children by participants, the different experiences and personalities that children bring to their everyday life in the ECEC environments, the consequent dynamics and changes that working in ECEC would encounter every day, and most importantly, the achievements and improvements children gain in all aspects of their development through their interactions with and under the supports of practitioners. According to the participants, these aspects of working with young children are paramount in their constructions of professional subjectivities, demonstrating a strong influence by shared, global discourses of loving and valuing children and their ECEC. Other factors that would also contribute to practitioners' accomplishments consist of a variety of cultural and personal specifics, based on my participants' replies. For example, many male and female practitioners who worked in early years centres in Edinburgh, as well as three practitioners who worked in kindergartens in less developed areas of Hong Kong, valued their work to support those vulnerable families and their various needs, which were rarely mentioned by practitioners from other types of institutions because their children's family backgrounds were different. Four Scottish practitioners and one Hong Kong practitioner mentioned their pleasant team working environment, whereas two other Chinese women practitioners (one from Hong Kong and one from Tianjin) and one Chinese male practitioner complained about their unsatisfactory experiences with some colleagues. One male Scottish practitioner, a male and a female Hong Kong practitioner, and another male practitioner from Tianjin, claimed that their principals'/managers' leadership styles (i.e. being

supportive and focusing on individual staff members' needs) and the available opportunities for career development provided by their institutions made them enjoy their job. There were rarely any gender differences found from the participants' arbitrary responses regarding what men and women practitioners in this research enjoy about their job as ECEC practitioners. One exclusive response that revealed an immediately gendered element, however, was from Kyle. Working in an early years centre in Edinburgh, he enjoyed the facts that single mothers appreciated his respectful interactions with them and recognized his significance as male role models. As he said:

A lot [of] single parents, single mothers, who see a man that's been respectful of them, positive with them, having built good relationships with them..... And also it's nice to hear the feedback from the parents, about it's nice to have a male role model because the child talks about me when they go home from nursery, they are really nice and really showing that I'm doing a good job here.

(Kyle, Male, Glastonbury Early Years Centre, Edinburgh)

In this particular context of some men being violent and abusing women within their family home in Edinburgh, Kyle's statement reflected the city's agenda to challenge widely-held stereotypes towards men in this culture, as described in *Chapter 6*. For Kyle, although he was relating gender to the value of his job in this particular environment, he was also demonstrating a non-traditional gender positioning of men being caring.

The variations of individual practitioners' attitudes towards their job were also evident when they reported on the challenges of working in ECEC. A wide range of work-related challenges were cited by practitioners cross-culturally in discursive manners, including for example, meeting the various needs of different children, communicating and working with parents, the low staff-student ratio and the very high workloads (particularly paper work), lack of experience, bureaucratic and political complexities, and/or dealing with relationships with colleagues. No challenges were specifically perceived by the Scottish participants to be related to their gender. On the contrary, some men from Hong Kong and Tianjin attributed many challenges to their gender. A noticeable aspect pointed out by half of the Chinese men was their described lack of meticulousness when working with young children, especially if compared to their female counterparts who are deemed to be 'naturally' more meticulous than men. ECEC is regarded

by those men as a job that requires considerable attention to detail, so as to address young children's everyday needs and to understand children comprehensively. By indicating their lack of confidence in this characteristic, it is likely that some Chinese male practitioners are asserting their 'real' masculinity/'difference' from the women practitioners in a perceived 'cool' way (Nentwich et al., 2013; Tennhoff et al., 2015) - something that Goffman (1969) calls 'role distance'. Those Chinese male practitioners also suggested how essentialist views of gender are powerfully influencing practitioners' gender constructions in China. Indeed, essentialist gender views that attach fixed male and female characteristics to men and women respectively, were consistently referred to in this research by the majority of Chinese participants, and I will discuss this strongly gendered positioning later in this chapter. Some other gender-specific challenges that Chinese male practitioners mentioned included their believed differences between male and female practitioners' thinking (examples given by some practitioners include that men tend to come up with science-related ideas more often when designing activities, mirroring traditional gender stereotypes that men are more rational than women [Francis & Skelton, 2001]), the difficulty for men to use 'child-friendly' voices (using 'child-friendly' voices is a common practice widely-adopted in Chinese ECEC settings, and practitioners usually model the ways young children speak and communicate with children in such ways), and the extra pressure on performance and achievements men would suffer when being the only man working with other women - what Williams (1995) argues to be 'tokenism' when men work in non-traditional occupations. All these challenges are connected with essentialist gender differences and social expectations of men being masculine (using 'child-friendly' voices is treated as feminine) and more achieving than women in Chinese societies.

The practitioners in this research revealed a wide variety of experiences of working in the ECEC workforce, including a range of gendered experiences, connected to the specific cultural contexts that practitioners worked in. Despite the contextual nature of such interactions, there were also signs that these practitioners shared more widely held pedagogical values that were common beyond their specific cultural contexts. And in this regard, the impact of gender is somewhat mitigated or challenged by the participants' professional constructions of their work. In Edinburgh, participant practitioners placed a strong

focus on supporting children's social and emotional development, and particularly on aspects like children's confidence and self-esteem. Some Chinese practitioners added that social experiences and skills are equally crucial for children's development in their early years, as well as moral education that teaches children 'good values, qualities, and behaviours'. Health and care is another universally agreed aspect by practitioners from across cultures to be vitally important, and some other points that practitioners randomly addressed in this research included preparation for primary schools, building up relationships, play, happiness, and fun. Academic learning was regarded by participants as less significant for both Scottish and Chinese young children in ECEC, and Chinese practitioners from both Hong Kong and Tianjin overwhelmingly blamed the high expectations of children's academic achievements by parents and societies.

No gender differences were reflected by participants concerning their professional understandings of ECEC, apart from two Hong Kongese female practitioners who referred to their roles of caring for young children to mothering. This perhaps counters the argument in the literature that says ECEC practitioners resist professionalization of the job and emphasize 'natural' caring ability (Taggart, 2011; Payler & Locke, 2013). Instead, this research tends to reveal that the participants were keen to emphasize their professional skills and trained abilities, appropriating 'professionalization' of the workforce as necessary in raising the social status of ECEC (Laere et al., 2014). No cultural differences were noted from participants' reflections on their professional subjectivities, either. The consistencies among practitioners' professional values of ECEC could be attributed to the powerful influences of national curricula for ECEC implemented in those cultures. I have discussed in *Chapter 6* that national curricular frameworks in Scotland, Hong Kong, and Mainland China demonstrate similar understandings and values of ECEC, leading to Scottish and Chinese practitioners' similar constructions of their professional values. Indeed, according to Schaub, Henck, and Baker (2017), the global policy convergence has led to global conceptions that view all children as in need of protection, preparation, and child development for the whole child - as participant practitioners in this research all have demonstrated. Gender did not seem to be overtly salient when practitioners talked about these professional values. Additionally, by emphasizing more on social, emotional, and physical aspects of child development and opposing academic learning, practitioners'

professional values in this research reflected Warin's (2014) concept of 'educare' that resolves traditional divisions between education and care (see *Chapter 4*). With 'educare' the social stigma that devalues caring in ECEC is challenged, which might facilitate shifts of understandings towards ECEC in all three cultures.

This research therefore suggests that, on the one hand, the devaluation of caring across cultures results in ECEC as a gendered profession. Many men were reluctant to work and/or suffered working in ECEC workforce because of the social stigma of ECEC being a caring and women's job. On the other hand, a more gender-neutral and valued understanding of ECEC as 'educare' is adopted by male ECEC practitioners and their female counterparts, which could in turn shift public understandings of ECEC and the gendered nature of 'caring' jobs. What is also important, it is expected that both men and women practitioners could challenge widely-held gender stereotypes and present children with a gender-diversified ECEC environment. The following discussions will thus focus on participant practitioners' gender subjectivities of working in ECEC, so as to investigate whether and how far practitioners can challenge traditional gender stereotypes held in Scottish and Chinese societies.

7.4 Beyond binaries or reproducing stereotypes?: gender subjectivities of practitioners

Having explored how individual practitioners situate their working experiences in ECEC workforce within and/or beyond wider social and gender structures, this section will seek for practitioners' direct opinions on gender. To what extent individual practitioners would challenge or reinforce gender differences between men and women, or even go beyond the gender binary, is presented.

7.4.1 Gender and roles of ECEC practitioners

Most Scottish practitioners agreed that male and female practitioners share the same workforce responsibilities and bring in their wide ranges of strengths and personalities as individuals. They emphasized the significance of teamwork in the workforce, and stated that each individual practitioner could learn from each other and support each other. There was a clear indication as expressed by the participants that those Scottish practitioners' conceptions of gender are not binary in this regard, and demonstrate diversified subjectivities of being men and

women. For example, Amy and John, working in the same classroom, discussed how they believed that each individual practitioner can be different regardless of their gender, and how working together as different individuals might inspire the children:

I think we've all learnt from each other, it's like he is very good at doing this and I can show him how to do that. [...] He is patient, helping me with computers. He is trustable, and I know that. [...] I don't think our team would work if we did have issues. I think because we get on so well, that's why the team works. We are very easy going and open. And there is no any differentiation with, you have to do that because you are a man and I have to do this because I am woman. [...] It's about confidence. I am confident doing the baking. [...] I can understand when someone goes on to an area and can be overwhelming. But I think my job is, to support that person, make as easy as possible, then build up to what they want to do. So it's building up confidence. It's not about, oh you can't do that because you are a man. Some women can't do either. Just practice and start to gain confidence. John just lacks confidence in that area [baking], no differential with him being a man.

(Amy, Female, Crewkerne Primary School Nursery Class, Edinburgh)

We all do everything. If it is like lifting heavy things, that's something we all do. But what we do is we will ask each other to help rather than, well, John can do that. We all do it. Again, this is kind of showing the children this is the way you deal with that. If one of us is struggling with lifting big bricks, well, why not ask one of your friends to help you and you can do this together. "Yeah, we can do it together." So I suppose it's the kind of thing we would show the children we can do that.

(John, Male, Crewkerne Primary School Nursery Class, Edinburgh)

John further added that: "I am not a very manly man", after I told him about how Chinese men might feel obligated to help women with heavy labour. John's words showed his construction of 'alternative masculinity' that opposes hegemonic masculinity (Buschmeyer, 2013). Interestingly, however, it was noticed that when Amy was exemplifying different strengths John and herself have, those strengths seemed to be gendered. Like some of my Chinese participants who maintained that men are usually better at technologies, Amy mentioned that she would need help from John with computers. She also used another example of baking to illustrate John's weakness, which seemingly is connected with women's expected capacities in domestic work. Such gendered presentations of individual strengths and weaknesses were also observed from Kyle's statement below:

Kyle: [W]e all offer certain strength, and we put them together as a team. I may have more strength in physical and active play with the children; and other [female] colleagues may be good at creative activities which I am not very good at. So we work together on each other's strengths, and we take on certain roles so that we manage things better. We talk to each other, we support each other. We plan our day and do our day together.

Researcher: Do you think these strengths and weaknesses may be related to gender?

Kyle: It could be a gender thing, actually I enjoy like physical, football, rugby... I play lots of those things. I never enjoy doing creative. I don't know if that's just individual thing or a male-female thing. At school boys tended to do more the physical, and the girls tended to do the more creative. I never had an interest in that, and I think most of my male friends were the very same. So I don't know why, there is possibility to be a gender thing.

(Kyle, Male, Glastonbury Early Years Centre, Edinburgh)

All in their 40s, the possibly gendered strengths and weaknesses of Amy, John, and Kyle might be attributed to their own gendered experiences of upbringing and schooling decades ago, as Kyle noticed himself. But in spite of this, their focuses on individualities and teamwork would arguably be able to show the children different ways of being men/women.

Whilst many Scottish practitioners opposed to the different roles men and women would take when working in ECEC, the gendered division of workforce responsibilities was sometimes evident in Scottish ECEC settings. Gavin reported that he does the 'messy, mucky cleaning up jobs' in his nursery, which he regarded as gender-specific. As he said:

It's nothing to do with the kids, that sort of thing. If something goes wrong, they might come to me first if it is something dangerous or that sort of thing. Yeah, so I cleared the blocked toilets, sort of horrible jobs. [laugh]

(Gavin, Male, Section Five Nursery, Edinburgh)

Heather, who worked together with Gavin, seemed to have a different opinion:

Heather: It's because he is in management, he is in a higher position so obviously he has got more responsibilities and many other jobs. But I don't think gender has anything to do with that.

Researcher: How about like labour stuff?

Heather: He will help sometimes but a lot of time we just get on with that. We work together.

(Heather, Female, Section Five Nursery, Edinburgh)

It appeared that Gavin's extra role as a deputy manager in his nursery added to the complexities of gender in his workforce. Although Heather viewed Gavin's supports as role-specific responsibilities, Gavin also attached a 'masculine' interpretation to those responsibilities himself and reflected his gender subjectivity of connecting leadership with masculinity (Chan, 2011; Read & Kehm, 2016). In addition, his 'masculine' gender subjectivity also seemed to override his class subjectivity as he was self-claimed to be doing toilet cleaning and unblock - jobs that are often done by mainly working-class women and minority ethnic cleaners, or working-class skilled male plumbers. Similarly, Philip believed that being a man resulted in him taking up more disciplinary roles (see *Chapter 9, Section 9.3.3* for further discussions) than other colleagues in his nursery:

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

(Philip, Male, Little Stars Nursery, Edinburgh)

Gavin's and Philip's statements may be indicative of their gender perceptions that biological differences between men and women lead to their different social roles. Whether and how those gendered perceptions held by some Scottish men would affect their interactions with children, will be elucidated in *Chapter 9*.

In comparison to most Scottish practitioners, the Chinese practitioners in Hong Kong and Tianjin largely agreed that men and women would be undertaking some sort of different roles both within and out of the essential teaching and caring for children. Some most overwhelming distinctions mentioned by almost all female and male practitioners, include that men would usually teach subjects/areas like science and physical sports whereas women are better at subjects like arts and dancing, that men are expected to take over all labour work and help women with technologies, and that men are rougher and women are more meticulous. All conform with traditional gender stereotypes about men and women in Chinese cultures and elsewhere (see *Table 4-1*). In particular, Mr Hu from Xiwang

youeryuan in Tianjin explained how those gender stereotypes shape his subjectivities of being a man:

I would feel embarrassed if I do not do those labour work, being a man. I think I am very male chauvinist and always feel that I need to look after them [the female practitioners]. They are younger than me, and I need to protect them. They might not need this though, they are all very strong. But I just have that obligation deep in my heart.

(Mr Hu, Male, Xiwang *youeryuan*, Tianjin)

Mr Hu's reflection suggests that one's gender subjectivities significantly instruct his/her behaviours.

Some other less frequently reported gendered roles also consist of hair tying for girls (which is usually female practitioners' job), taking children to toilets (male practitioners have to avoid taking girls to toilet), and working with younger children (male practitioners are not expected to work with children under the ages of 3/4, who are deemed to be needing more caring). Those aspects were however, considerably reflected in the observations and I will discuss them in further details in *Chapter 9 (Section 9.2)*. In describing those gender stratifications in the kindergartens, four female practitioners (3 from Hong Kong and 1 from Tianjin) particularly related the roles of male and female practitioners to those of fathers and mothers. For example, Ms Choi said that:

It's like a family in the kindergarten. Female teachers are like children's 'mothers', and Mr Fok is their 'father'. I think children also need to learn how to communicate with adults when they come to the kindergarten, in addition to learning to communicate with their peers. [...] So children communicate with female teachers like they do with mothers, and communicate with male teachers like they do with their fathers. These are different. They will learn how to communicate with male and female adults differently.

(Ms Choi, Female, Baptist Chi Sang School, Hong Kong)

Ms Bao added that:

Girls should stay more with their mothers, in order to develop female characteristics. Boys should stay with their fathers or other adult men, for the benefits of developing masculinity.

(Ms Bao, Female, Chenchen *youeryuan*, Tianjin)

As a result of this recognition of different male and female roles in working with children, Mr Fok who worked with Ms Choi in the same classroom, pointed out that children were divided into a boy group and a girl group. Mr Fok was key worker to all the boys, and Ms Choi was mainly responsible for the girls. Again, there will be further discussions on the impacts of such gendered arrangements on children in *Chapter 9 (Section 9.1)*.

The strongly gendered stratifications in Chinese kindergartens, as reported by practitioners themselves, reveal the powerful influences of traditional gender binary thinking (which has been discussed in *Chapter 6* as being influenced by Confucianism) on Chinese participants' gender subjectivities. But occasionally, some practitioners would also challenge established gender stereotypes. For instance, two male practitioners said that they did try to tie hair for the girls; and one female practitioner acknowledged that there might be possibilities for some men to be more meticulous than women in doing tasks like hair tying. Although Mrs Woo also agreed that kindergarten is like a family with a 'mother' and a 'father', she realised that she was actually taking on a father's role of discipline in the classroom. Her descriptions are extracted below:

I am more strict and disciplinary, and Mr Cheung is looser. It's just like how children interact with their parents at home - one will be strict and one will be loose. Usually it's the father who is strict. So in our case, it's nothing to do with gender, but it's more down to experience. If he lacks experiences in disciplining, he might overdo it. Or if he does not know how to express his requirements to the child, it will be problematic. That's why I become the one who is strict.

(Mrs Woo, Female, Yan Oi Church Kindergarten)

Whilst Mrs Woo herself believed that her adoption of a disciplinary role is unrelated to gender, it is suggestive from her statements that she (and her male colleague) is complexly challenging as well as accommodating normative discourses. Indeed, Mrs Woo's case was not uncommon in Chinese kindergartens. With most male practitioners being less experienced, Hong Kong and Tianjin kindergartens normally would allocate a more experienced female practitioner to work with a less experienced male practitioner. I have observed that, in most of these cases, the female practitioners were often the ones who disciplined the children more. More analyses of this distinction in disciplining children will be followed in *Chapter 9*. What is to be addressed here is that, experience also

intersects with gender to impact on the roles of male and female practitioners in Chinese kindergartens, as noted by many other practitioners in this research.

7.4.2 Male role models

I have already touched upon earlier in this chapter that, some Scottish male participants frequently mentioned their significance as male role models for children. This strong discourse of '*male role model*' underpins the main reasons for encouraging men to work with young children in both Scottish and Chinese societies. Nevertheless, the interpretations of what a male role model would mean to those male practitioners, might be different from culture to culture. In Edinburgh, male early years officers/practitioners working in early years centres perceive themselves/are perceived by others as male role models that show to the children men could be caring, safe, and positive, expectedly challenging gender stereotypes. As many children in those centres might have negative experiences with a man (usually their fathers) at home, or are brought up with single mothers, it is regarded as important for them to have contacts with a positive '*male role model*'. Kyle provided a detailed explanation on being a positive male role model:

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

(Kyle, Male, Glastonbury Early Years Centre, Edinburgh)

As stated earlier, Kyle and his many other male colleagues in Scotland are trying to challenge some children's experiences with men being tough and violent, and to present non-traditional male figures such as caring. His female colleague, Alice agreed on this and reflected her understanding of being a right type of role model:

A male role model for me is somebody who has an impact on a person's life in whole positive ways. Someone who may be a care giver, a supporter, a friend, ... someone who does something for others. [...] You get poor males as poor male role model, as you do with women. Because you are female, doesn't mean you will be a fantastic care giver or practitioner. So it's nothing to do with gender, it's to do with your upbringing, your skills, your nature and personality... to care for others.

(Alice, Female, Glastonbury Early Years Centre, Edinburgh)

Gavin also provided a similar quote in terms of how he understood male role model:

I think [it is] important that we teach children the right values, teach them how to show empathy for somebody, how to help somebody when they are hurt, how to not care what colour they are, whether they've got glasses [...]. The role model of how we behave with each other it's what it's about. [...]

(Gavin, Male, Section Five Nursery, Edinburgh)

Ann and Gavin's statements go beyond the binary gender distinctions implied in the 'male role model' discourse (see *Chapter 3, Section 3.1.4*), and emphasized figures that all practitioners are expected to possess, male or female.

In agreement with being a positive male role model for children from violent or single families, Scottish male practitioners also suggested that they are there to cater for children's gendered needs. John described how his presence in the nursery helped a boy get settled. This boy would not speak to women when he first came to the nursery (although he is said to be having both a father and a mother), and John therefore became his primary contact. Sean also said that 'some children respond better to males than they do to women. Particularly boys are just looking for a bit more of a male figure to interact with, can be a really positive thing.' Although it is beyond this research to understand why some children would react to men in specific ways (for example, the boy in John's class who lives with his mom and dad, and has a big brother), assumptions could be made based on discussions in *Chapter 8* that such gendered behaviours of children can be related to their experiences at home. But from the practitioners' side, some male practitioners in Edinburgh were found both to challenge gender stereotypes of (some) men being violent, and to respond to children's gendered needs, suggesting those men's gender flexibility (Butler, 1990; Warin & Adrian, 2017; Warin, 2017) in performing both traditionally 'masculine' and 'feminine' characteristics.

The Chinese interpretations of male role model by some participants in this research, however, are strongly linked to expectations of male practitioners teaching boys about being men in China. Male practitioners believed that their presence in the kindergartens are to make boys aware of their distinctions from

girls. Their gender subjectivities in this regard are situated within the discourse of gender socialisation that suggests there are ‘masculine’ behaviours and characteristics that children can learn from, so as boys are masculinized into ‘appropriate’ male figures expected by the society. Mr Tang, a ‘care’ practitioner from Kuaile *youeryuan* in Tianjin, offered a representative quote that matches with most Chinese male practitioners’ understanding of being a male role model:

The way a male teacher behaves in the kindergarten will provide children with masculine influences. I think this is the most important thing to have men working in kindergartens. Because it [the kindergarten] has always been a predominantly female environment, children [boys] are gradually becoming feminised.

(Mr Tang, Male, Kuaile *youeryuan*, Tianjin)

Mr Tang also put forward how this gendered discourse of male role model in Chinese society should shape (in his views) male practitioners’ performance in kindergartens:

[Researcher: Do you think all male teachers possess those male characteristics?]

Mr Tang: I think I have them in myself, and a male kindergarten teacher has to show those characteristics to children. If you don’t have those male characteristics, you will need to purposefully perform in such ways, to develop those characteristics among children.

(Mr Tang, Male, Kuaile *youeryuan*, Tianjin)

Being aware that not all men possess expected ‘male’ characteristics, Mr Tang pointed to the possibilities/necessities of men ‘doing’ gender in adherence to ‘compulsory heterosexuality’ (Rich, 1980; Butler, 1990) in Chinese society. There is no sign however, that Chinese male practitioners would challenge and ‘undo’ those gendered expectations.

The gendered stratifications of male and female roles that are aligned with traditional gender structures, according to this research, are only evident in Scottish ECEC settings to a limited extent, but are enormously visible in Chinese kindergartens. Acknowledging these non-gendered or gendered divides, the coming section will move on to examine whether Scottish and Chinese practitioners perceive any gender differences in terms of how they approach their shared responsibilities in the ECEC workforce.

7.4.3 Gender differences between male and female practitioners?

Scottish participants in this study indicated both sameness and differences with regards to their styles and approaches in their jobs. There seems to be a discourse/set of ideas around everyone (or at least the genders) being 'similar' and at the same time a discourse of everyone being 'different' that paradoxically shaped Scottish participants' gender and/or professional subjectivities. Some female practitioners thought that their practices are similar to their male colleagues because for example, '[they] manage children in a similar way', 'have same expectations from children', and 'know that children come first before paper work'. The majority of other female and male practitioners emphasized that every individual practitioner has his/her different styles, and it is through communication, support, and teamwork that all those differences are brought together in the workforce. Two representative quotes from one male and one female practitioner, regarding this individuality of each practitioner, are cited as follows:

Everybody does their job differently and has their own ways of doing their job.

(Connie, Female, Little Stars Nursery, Edinburgh)

We've got a staff team here of 23 or 24, and there are a lot of different styles. I suppose you want to take everyone's own ideas and everyone's approach into account, take on the ideas and implement them even it's not your thought in the room. You work together, and sometimes you work in someone else's style for part of the job. [...]

(Sean, Male, Guild Early Years Centre, Edinburgh)

Such statements, again, go beyond gender binary and reflect a discourse of appreciating individuality and diversity in Scotland. In addition, according to the participants, those individual differences were closely linked with individuals' personalities, social and working experiences, and upbringing. Little influence has been directly attributed to gender by those practitioners, male or female. Nonetheless, as gender is embodied as fluid social experience, there are possibilities that those individual practitioners' personal experiences can be gendered. For instance, several male and female participants mentioned that female practitioners are generally believed to be better at multi-tasking and are more organized than their male counterparts. These differences were regarded

by the participants as relevant to their gendered upbringing, or previous experiences. Such gendered upbringing or experiences, however, were not fixed, as one male practitioner was already said to be getting better in being organized by his female colleague since he worked in the centre. Additionally, Alice suggested that her childhood experiences with positive male role models have made her into an outgoing, open-minded person who likes to play and have fun with children. This links to her descriptions of 'male role model' above, although she is implying here that men are more likely to possess characteristics like being outgoing and open-minded. She is also implying that a 'masculine' environment can 'bring out' women's 'masculine' side. Growing up with a single mother and several sisters, Carl attributed his caring and affectionate personality to his upbringing environment. Similarly, Laura explained why she tends to stay away from engaging in outdoor activities with children, as a result of how she was raised up in gendered ways: "I was brought up that you wear in a pretty dress and you need to keep your dress clean. That's always the way I was, you don't get dirty." Laura's reflection is indicative of a discourse of feminine 'neatness'/lack of physicality that shaped her upbringing experiences (Curtis, 1994). Recognizing those gendered experiences that practitioners might have experienced themselves would help understand why some of them also reported, with some uncertainties, gender differences between men and women.

To illustrate, although Connie specified that everyone is different in her quote listed above, she also noticed that the male practitioners she worked with work slightly differently from herself and other female colleagues - in that female practitioners do more casual talk about out-of-school life with the children, and that male practitioners are more relaxed towards their work, comparing to females who often feel rushed. Philip was unsure about whether his more disciplinary style is due to his gender or personality, as he also found another female colleague in his centre who has similar style. Kyle noticed that his approach to comforting children is different from his female colleagues. As he explained:

I've got an expectation that if a child is upset, I would comfort the child and reassure them. Then I would have an expectancy for them to, once being comforted and reassured, go off and play with their peers, to get over the upset more quickly. Maybe sometimes from a female perspective, they tend to take longer, maybe cuddle and attach, walk around with the child in their hand, talking to them, reassure them... but taking a longer

process. But I believe sometimes the longer it takes, the harder it gets for the child to separate again. I think that's what we do differently. And I see that quite regular.

(Kyle, Male, Glastonbury Early Years Centre, Edinburgh)

Sean and Carl also noted that men tend to be less affectionate in their interactions with children. Whilst Sean explained this differentiation as consequences of social stigma towards men by children's parents, as well as his previous experiences working in primary schools with older children from affluent family backgrounds (who therefore will have less issues with nurturing at home, comparing to children in early years centres with problematic family backgrounds), Carl believed that women are generally more affectionate and cuddle children more often than men.

He even provided a strong statement that reveals binary thinking of gender:

I think for the whole centre. I [bring] diversity, bring a whole sort of different challenge to everyone. If that is a predominantly female environment in that room, I break that up a bit, I put a different slide on it. I think men and women are sort of designed to be compatible anyway in that sense. I don't mean the loving sort of relationship, I just mean in general men are always designed to be opposite women, there is always attractions between men and women in general, which also reflect on people working as well. There is a different communication goes on between a man and a woman [...].

(Carl, Male, Falm Early Years Centre, Edinburgh)

It is interesting to see that, on the one hand, Carl regarded himself as an affectionate man and attributed his 'female' characteristics to the 'female influences' he had from his mother and sisters; on the other hand, Carl held strong opinions of gender binary and agreed with the compensational roles that men and women would bring into a workforce respectively. Such paradoxes also existed in Jackie's gender subjectivities, as she deemed that there are differences between men and women:

I just think men think differently, it's probably nice for them to work with women as well, because women bring something different. I just think men and women think differently and maybe bring different things.

But also thought that men are not all the same:

Sometimes although I'm saying as much as it's nice to have men, sometimes it's more about having the right person who has the right skills. I've only got experiences with the men I worked in here, so I don't really say as a generalization thing, because that would be unfair to all the men who work in childcare.

(Jackie, Female, Crawley Early Years Centre, Edinburgh)

Carl's and Jackie's paradoxical constructions of gender, together with other Scottish practitioners' uncertainties about gender differences between men and women, suggest that gender is more complicated than being essentialist characteristics attached to men and women separately, and is socially accumulated through experiences and interactions with individuals' wider surroundings. Those paradoxical constructions can also be influenced by the discourse of 'individuality' in Scotland, as has been frequently mentioned in this research. It is thus deduced that teacher training is necessary in Scotland, for practitioners to understand gender in more explicit ways. Practitioners' solid gender subjectivities have significant influences on their interactions with children, as has been reflected by Gavin who said that "I think because it's always in my head that it [gender] shouldn't make any difference, I've never let it guide how I behave." Regardless of whether or not Gavin actually performs 'gender-neutral' practices as he thinks, it is emphasized here that there is a need for practitioners to be gender-sensitive in their practices.

Like Scottish practitioners, most Hong Kong practitioners also thought that the different styles of working and interacting with children among colleagues are down to personalities, knowledge and skills, and most importantly, experiences. Even if men were generally deemed to be less meticulous and less sensitive, and therefore unable to fully address children's various needs (usually caring needs), male and female practitioners in Hong Kong were optimistic that the experiences that male practitioners gained through practices would help reduce this perceived weakness. Gender seemed to be one of the many factors in a matrix that mutually influence on how individual practitioners conduct their work in those Hong Kongese practitioners' eyes, reflecting the same discourse of 'individuality' as in Scotland. And in most cases, gender differences were reported by them to be overridden by individuals' professional experiences working in ECEC. Two particular views stand out among Hong Kongese practitioners' perceptions of gender differences, and offered some inspirational insights into the gender discourses in Hong Kong. Mr Chin from HKTA Tuen Wan Kindergarten regarded his styles and approaches as no different from other female colleagues, because he was intentionally modelling from those more experienced female practitioners in

his first year of employment. Assuming that it might be different if he was modelling from a more experienced male practitioner, Mr Chin on the one hand still held essentialist views of gender; on the other hand, he suggested that he is able to perform in ways that he regarded as incompatible with his gender, in order to meet the specific needs of his work and adapt to the predominantly female working environment:

To work with children, a lot of times I have to speak in soft voices and treat children gently. I felt really uncomfortable about this at the start, as you know, men are rough and speak loudly. But I have to be soft because otherwise children will not listen to you. Also, since the whole kindergarten speak in such a way, it might make me look abnormal if I speak roughly and loudly, and perform manly.

(Mr Chin, Male, HKTA Tuen Wan Kindergarten, Hong Kong)

Mr Chin's strategy of 'performing the opposite gender' was also adopted by Mr Chiu, who said that:

I can play a very 'feminine' character in the classroom if needed under certain scenarios, I don't mind. I can do that, and have no problem with it. I am a teacher after all, and I need to do as much as I can to cater for my teaching activities. I can't say that I won't do it because it's embarrassing.

(Mr Chiu, Male, Yau Oi Kindergarten, Hong Kong)

Mr Chiu's statement does not challenge the gender opposites of being men and women either. It was also implied in his words that performing in 'feminine' ways is embarrassing for a man, and he is therefore sacrificing for his job. Both Mr Chin's and Mr Chiu's interpretations of 'gender performativity' seem to go against Butler's (1990 & 2004) descriptions of 'doing' gender. As discussed in *Chapter 2*, gender is not something one 'has' but is something that is constructed through performing it in interaction. Although Mr Chin and Mr Chiu 'think' that they are 'performing' gender, there is an element of them saying they 'know' they are putting on a performance of femininity here that is different from their 'real' gender. Whereas Butler (1990 & 2004) would say even this 'real' gender identity is not 'real'. Further, Mr Chiu's indicated embarrassment might be understood through the hierarchies between (heterosexual) masculinity and femininity, as embedded in the form of 'heterosexual matrix' (Butler, 1990).

Whilst the Scottish practitioners strongly appreciated each individuals' perceived personal traits and experiences, and were sometimes critical of binary gender differences; and the Hong Kongese practitioners prioritized their professional experiences over gender in their work, practitioners from Tianjin overwhelmingly perceived gender in terms of the discourse of essentialist gender differences between men and women, and described how such differences result in male and female practitioners' distinctive working styles in ECEC. For example, male practitioners were reported to be engaging more in play activities with children, initiating more big movements and risk-taking activities, and adopting a more boisterous and rougher approach in their teaching and interactions with children. By contrast, female practitioners were assumed to be more meticulous and better attending to details. Male practitioners are 'smooth' and open-minded in their communications with children, whereas female practitioners are more affectionate and soft. The consistencies of those practitioners' interpretations on gender differences between men and women are significant and match with what has been discussed about men's perceived 'unique' contributions to ECEC among Chinese academic literature (Li, 2015; Xu, 2016; Zhao, 2016). There were also extensive examples provided by both male and female practitioners regarding those differences in this research. Here I am only picking up a few to exemplify Mainland Chinese practitioners' gendered constructions of their job performances:

Male teachers like to play with the children and can be as boisterous as children. No female kindergarten teachers would be willing to run with the children from one side of the playground to the other, right? You can sense the different atmospheres when a male teacher is leading an outdoor activity, his movements and his voices are all different. I think male teachers are different [from female teachers] in their gender, and all male teachers I know have similar characteristics. [...]

(Ms Bao, Female, Chenchen *youeryuan*, Tianjin)

Men and women are different, especially in aspects such as patience and details. Women automatically possess those qualities that are needed for working in ECEC. For example, love, patience, mothering, caring. I do have those qualities in myself, but not as obvious as women. Especially when it comes to trivial matters, I am always careless and will miss one or two things.

(Mr Hu, Male, Xiwang *youeryuan*, Tianjin)

I once demonstrated a class activity in another kindergarten, and all teachers agreed that male and female teachers teaching differently. Male

teachers' instructions were regarded as smooth and straightforward. Our languages are brief and only say things that are necessary.

(Mr Han, Male, Xuxi *youeryuan*, Tianjin)

Male teachers' communications and interactions with children are different from female teachers. Like female teachers would cuddle children more, and do behaviours like that. Male teachers are more likely to encourage children with words and less behaviours. Cuddles and kisses are less likely to be initiated by male teachers.

(Miss Tai, Female, Kuaile *youeryuan*, Tianjin)

A list of prevailingly perceived men's and women's gender characteristics in Chinese culture that emerged from this research is further given below:

Table 7-1 Perceived men's and women's gender characteristics in China

Men	Women
Playful	Mothering
Risky	Caring
Boisterous	Quiet
Rough	Meticulous
Smooth	Patient
More verbal encouragement	More cuddling & kisses
Rational	Emotional
Better at subjects such as science and technologies	Better at subjects such as arts and dancing

Those gendered characteristics match with some of the traditional gender stereotypes listed in *Table 4-1* about Scotland and Indonesia, and suggest perpetuating discourses of essentialist and binary gender thinking in which Mainland Chinese practitioners construct their gender subjectivities in this research.

No practitioners in Tianjin challenged those gender stereotypes as listed above. Moreover, they also depicted on how their gendered subjectivities shaped their different treatments towards boys and girls in the kindergartens. As Miss Tai reflected:

I think there are some differences [in terms of how I treat boys and girls]. Maybe because I think girls are more vulnerable, I will pay particular

attention to the way I speak to girls. Boys are more outgoing in their characteristics, so I wouldn't care that much.

(Miss Tai, Female, Kuaile *youeryuan*, Tianjin)

Mr Hu further expanded on this difference and explained how his different treatments to girls and boys are related to the wider gender structure in this culture:

I would treat boys and girls differently. For girls, I think they are more sensitive, and have stronger self-esteem. [Therefore, I will be careful in the way I speak to them.] But I wish girls to be less strong and more delicate, girls should have girls' traits. [...] Girls will depend on men in the future, so it will not do good to her if she is too strong. Men would feel their wives do not need them, and will have affairs outside home. Hence girls should be more dependent, this is my thought. And I think I should influence girls in this regard. [...]

For boys, if they make any mistakes, I will not let them go and will definitely blame them hard. There are many suicides among boys now in primary or secondary schools, after their teachers censured them. I would rather give them hard time now, to make them stronger and more resilient. Men suffered more pressures in our society, and I want my boys to be strong enough to cope with those pressures.

(Mr Hu, Male, Xiwang *youeryuan*, Tianjin)

Drawing on this hierarchical gender structure in Chinese culture, Mr Hu's statement points to the issue of how dominant gender discourses including hegemonic masculinity (such as that women need to be dependent on men and that men need to be strong) are discursively produced and reiterated from as early as in kindergartens. With the majority of practitioners, male and female, holding strongly gendered subjectivities and performing their jobs in compliance with traditional gender structures, gender transformation (Warin, 2017) is not likely to take place in Chinese kindergartens. Nevertheless, there are some emerging indications in this research that Chinese practitioners may sometimes be reflective about the gender differences. For instance, Miss Tai who talked about how she treated boys and girls differently above, was also reflecting on her gendered practices:

As we spend longer time with the children, we realise that their different characteristics are not actually gender-related, but may be influenced by family environments. Girls may not always be meticulous, and some may also be outgoing. Some boys can be vulnerable, too. We therefore start to communicate with children according to their different personalities,

and treat them correspondingly. This takes time [...] and we need to learn about children's own thoughts.

(Miss Tai, Female, Kuaile *youeryuan*, Tianjin)

In her 20s, Miss Tai's thoughts reflect the growing power of discourses of 'child-centredness' in Chinese ECEC. To what extent such discourses will be widely accepted by different generations of practitioners, and whether these will contribute to gender transformation (Warin, 2017) in Chinese society, are worthy of further investigation.

7.5 Looking ahead: future career plans of ECEC practitioners

When asked about what their career plans may look like in 10 years' time, participant practitioners cited societal and individual attributes that could impact upon their career prospects. Foucault's (1988) technologies of the self (individuals attaining desired subjectivities through interactions with discourses) were employed and a neoliberal discourse of 'self-improvement' was reflected. Many practitioners, male and female, were self-motivated and wished to upgrade their qualifications and improve professional knowledge and skills. These are usually accompanied with ambitions towards promotion and salary raise. Some female and male participants expressed their interests in management roles or teacher training positions, whereas some said they were neither interested in, nor suitable for administrative positions, and would like to spend time with children in the classrooms. Traditional gender stereotypes that men are more ambitious towards leadership and management roles were challenged in this research by showing that such ambitions are not exclusive to men, and that not all men are interested in/suitable for those roles. However, two Hong Kongese male practitioners mentioned that there are social expectations in Chinese societies that men should be more achieving and earning more than women (no women practitioners mentioned about this though). And those expectations persuade many men including themselves into seeking for management and highly-paid roles in ECEC. By contrast, Miss Tso from Yau Oi Kindergarten in Hong Kong said that although she wishes to take up senior management roles in her kindergarten in the future, this is dependent on her family situations, suggesting an opposite social expectation in Chinese societies that women should be more accountable for domestic responsibilities than men. It is however, insufficient to predict how far

Miss Tso will resist to this discourse in the future. The three practitioners' awareness of social expectations towards men and women in Hong Kong/China reflects the social construction of gender differences, as well as its power in affecting individual's experiences.

Such effects were also indicated by two male practitioners from Tianjin, who said they might leave the ECEC profession due to the social and financial pressures (reflected in discourses such as men as breadwinners) placed on them. Expectations by others and the society seemed to have influenced their career prospects significantly. Two other men, Mr Han from Xuxi *youeryuan* and Mr Niu from Beiguan *youeryuan*, said they will try to apply for tenure positions in their kindergartens and will remain in the sector only if they get one. Their thoughts are consistent with what I have explained earlier that men are likely to work in public kindergartens in China for a secure and well-paid position. Only one male practitioner from Scotland, Philip, who worked in a private nursery, said he will leave his job due to its low pay and high pressure. No female practitioners from any of the three cities said they would leave this profession for any societal reasons. All seemed to be remaining in ECEC workforce for at least a few years' time and only some early career practitioners were unsure about their longer career plans.

Indeed, the uncertainties of future career concerns were evident among both male and female participants who were in their early years of profession. Conversely, other experienced practitioners were more settled in their career and would either remain in or retire from their current job in 10 years' time. Age differences in terms of individual practitioners' career plans were therefore noted, bearing in mind that the majority of Chinese male participants in this study are below 30 years old. More importantly, age was found to intersect with gender in affecting male practitioners' career prospects in ECEC. According to one Scottish and two Hong Kongese male practitioners' (in their 30s or 20s) feedback, they will not work with young children in ECEC classrooms when they get older, because people may be suspicious of an 'old' man who have direct contacts with children in ECEC environments. As Gavin from Scotland explained:

Gavin: I have a small concern, I'm gonna be nearly forty, and I have a feeling that people would perceive an older gentleman in childcare as a strange thing. That is definitely gender, and that is probably wrong, but

I do think people would judge me for being an older guy and working on the floor in a nursery. I never really want to do management, I never have stepped into deputy role. And I guess I may continue up that path, but it was more out of a concern that I would be judged for still being working with kids at that age.

Researcher: Why do you think it's that?

Gavin: I've got no good reason for that, I just discussed with my wife, an intuition that people could pass judgement. And also I've got my own kids now, I want them to be proud of their dad, I guess I would like to do something more... so whether I go to the social care side or whether I push on an develop into further up the ladder in early years, I probably say that's the direction I'd go. So that is the only time that gender has crossed my mind. I don't know, there is just something that makes me feel people would judge me being on the floor as an old guy.

(Gavin, Section Five Nursery, Edinburgh)

Gavin's concern has been proved to be not bothering Raymond, Kyle, Carl, or John, who were all beyond 40 and were working in ECEC in Edinburgh, although Kyle and Carl did mention that their roles as fathers helped reduce parents' concerns and suspicions. But considering that all male practitioners recruited from Hong Kong and Tianjin kindergartens in this research are well below 30 except one who is in his early 30s, it might be deduced that age would intersect with gender in stigmatizing men's participation in Chinese ECEC.

7.6 Summary

This chapter has discussed how dominant gender discourses discursively impacted on practitioners' experiences and subjective understandings of working in ECEC workforce in Scotland, Hong Kong, and Mainland China. Different social expectations of men and women are still found to be pervasive in constructing ECEC as a gendered profession in all three cultures. Optimistically and arguably, however, such gendered construction of ECEC might be changed by shifting understandings of ECEC towards a more gender-neutral concept of 'educare'. Further, as individuals' gender subjectivities are enabled or constrained by the discourses that situate them, the discursiveness of how each individual practitioner reiterates dominant gender discourses in this research reveals the various levels of agency for individual practitioners to subvert those discourses. Therefore, it is important to explore whether individual practitioners would reproduce or challenge existing gender structures in ECEC within or beyond their cultures. Having men working in ECEC might shift traditional understanding of ECEC as a caring and women's job, or change societal expectations of men's roles

(that it is okay for men to be in caring roles); but what is more significant is to challenge widely-held gender stereotypes about being men and women, and to ultimately go beyond those gender binaries.

This study suggests that male and female practitioners' gender subjectivities can be different from individual to individual, and from culture to culture. At an individual level, each practitioner might construct their gender subjectivities with references to their wider social experiences, gendered or non-gendered. The varieties of gender subjectivities reflected by my participant practitioners require us to go beyond gender binary of being men and women, and to focus on each individual practitioner's gender subjectivities. There are both men and women who are gender stereotypical, and there are gender-reflective and -transformative male and female practitioners as well. For the sake of promoting gender diversity and challenging gender stereotypes in ECEC, transforming practitioners' gender subjectivities are important for both male and female practitioners. At a cultural level, it is indicative through comparisons of Scottish, Hong Kong, and Mainland Chinese cultures that cultural-specific gender discourses significantly shape individuals' gender subjectivities within the culture. By looking at the Scottish case, it is obvious that practitioners are frontline gender transformers in their cultures. Considering that all three cultures are to various degrees, influenced by traditional gender discourses, systematic teacher training is required in all three cultures for practitioners to become inspirational gender transformers.

Chapter 8 Children's views on their practitioners' gender

This chapter will explore how children view their practitioners of different gender based upon their interpretations of three pictures that present familiar adult behaviours in children's everyday life. As detailed in *Chapter 5*, each picture portrays an adult who is deliberately 'de-gendered', manifesting either a culturally female-oriented (holding a baby), a culturally male-oriented (kicking a ball), or an arguably less gender-specific (reading a story book) behaviour. Participant children from Scotland, Hong Kong and Mainland China, aged 3-6 years old, were encouraged to express their perspectives of gender through discussions of these pictures and in particular, their perspectives of male and female practitioners. Specifically, I have discussed in *Chapter 5* that there were fewer children from Edinburgh (55 altogether, as compared to 108 from Hong Kong and 117 from Tianjin) who participated in those activities, due to their lack of verbal facility either being too young (around 2 years old) or lacking the confidence. Any interpretations of the data in this chapter will, therefore, be considered with this in mind.

8.1 'Who is holding a baby?' Gendered bodies in children's eyes

For those children who participated in the activity, their responses to the baby-holding picture revealed strong connections between gendered bodies and behaviours in children's eyes. As can be seen from *Table 8-1*, the majority of children (191 out of 280, 68.2%) tended to associate baby-holding behaviours with their mothers in the first instance, regardless of their cultural backgrounds. The children's justifications for making this immediate connection suggested a hard-to-challenge bond between women's social roles as child carers and their reproductive body functions. Many children claimed that, because 'mothers give birth to babies/babies come from mummy's tummy', mothers usually 'look after babies, hold them, and breastfeed them'. Although some added that dads will also hold babies, there is a strong pattern from this research that women's roles as primary child carers were rarely challenged according to those children's experiences. Further, some children reported the same quote that 'dad is busy at work and mom stays at home looking after me', revealing that the gendered structure of men as main 'breadwinners' and women as 'domestic homemakers' are still evident in both Chinese and Scottish societies. A few other children

mentioned that fathers like to ‘play computer/mobile games’ instead of looking after kids, confirming another gender stereotype of men’s greater engagement with technology than women.

Table 8-1 Who is holding a baby?

Answer	Edinburgh		Hong Kong		Tianjin		Overall
	% of Boys (n = 31)	% of Girls (n = 24)	% of Boys (n = 56)	% of Girls (n = 52)	% of Boys (n = 61)	% of Girls (n = 56)	(n = 280)
Mother	54.8%	66.7%	60.7%	76.9%	62.3%	82.1%	68.2%
Father	22.6%	12.5%	32.1%	17.3%	24.6%	7.1%	20%
Others	19.4%	25%	5.4%	N/A	11.5%	3.6%	8.6%
Male practitioner	38.7%	37.5%	48.2%	28.8%	60.7%	33.9%	42.5%
Female practitioner	25.8%	33.3%	39.3%	59.6%	39.3%	62.5%	45.7%

For those children who indicated that it is a man/father holding a baby in the picture (20% on average and no substantial differences between settings), they also tended to categorize by gender their images of fathers’ (men’s) and mothers’ (women’s) bodies in their descriptions. It is a father in the picture (see *Appendix*) because fathers were mostly described as ‘tall’, ‘having short or no hair’, ‘wearing trousers’, or ‘physically stronger [than mothers] to carry a baby’. Correspondingly, it is not a mother in the picture because mothers ‘have long hairs’, ‘wear skirts’, or ‘wear high heels’. Those stereotypical images of gendered bodies, as well as the above-mentioned divisions of gendered roles, seemed to be largely derived from the children’s own experiences in the wider social community especially at the family home; as many based their answers on what happened in real life in this research. Although such influences were significantly evident throughout this research and point to the necessity of challenging children’s gender stereotypes beyond the educational settings (Francis, 2010a), the current study will mainly focus on whether challenging children’s gender stereotypes is possible through their interactions with practitioners.

Since almost all children initially indicated that it is either a mother or a father holding a baby in the picture presented, a more specific question of ‘which of your practitioners do you think will hold a baby’ was added. With a total of 119 children (42.5%) giving the names of their male practitioners and another 128 children (45.7%) answering other female practitioners, it appeared possible that practitioners can challenge children’s stereotypes of women as the only child carers - considering that children did not distinguish their male and female practitioners in childcare roles as much as they did with mothers and fathers. Although in Hong Kong and Tianjin, boys mentioned their male practitioners more often than girls did, and girls were more likely to suggest that female practitioners hold babies (see *Table 8-1*). A cultural difference is thus indicative here in that Chinese children tend to relate more to practitioners of their same gender than Scottish children would. When looking into the conversations with children, however, more dynamic pictures were presented. Firstly, the gender-stereotypical distinctions between men and women remained significant in all three cultures. Children were aware of the gender of different practitioners and always linked men and women practitioners to their fathers and mothers respectively. Men practitioners were therefore less likely to hold a baby because ‘they are men’, ‘they cannot give birth to babies’, and ‘they are like fathers’; or were similarly portrayed as ‘tall’, ‘physically strong’, ‘having short/no hair’ and/or ‘wearing trousers’ as were fathers. Likewise, women practitioners were ‘like mothers’, ‘can give birth to babies’, and thus are more likely to hold babies. Women practitioners were deemed to have long hair, wear skirts, and are kind to children like mothers. The gendered connection between babies and women practitioners was particularly enhanced in some Chinese (Tianjin and Hong Kong) kindergartens where women practitioners have either discussed their own children with the pupils or brought their babies to the classrooms.

Secondly, there was also evidence that practitioners’ gender may sometimes be transcended by their professional roles in children’s eyes. Either a man or a woman practitioner can hold a baby because ‘they are teachers’, ‘they look after us’, and ‘children love them’. Even though such statements were relatively rare, it is suggestive that traditional gender stereotypes of women as primary carers can be challenged among children by having men working in ECEC settings. Below

are conversations that I had with a boy in Tianjin, suggesting possibilities of such challenges:

Boy: It's a mom holding a baby.

Researcher: Why?

Boy: Because fathers are not as good [as mothers].

Researcher: What if this is one of the teachers in your classroom?

Boy: It's a man teacher then.

Researcher: Why is that?

Boy: Because I think men teachers should possess some masculinity.

Researcher: And why is he holding a baby then?

Boy: Cause he is not as bad as dad.

Researcher: So you think this is Mr Han?

Boy: Nope, I think it's you. Mr Han do look after us and can be caring, but he is a bit [tough] to us, he has some masculinity in the kindergarten.

Researcher: So you do not think I have masculinity?

Boy: I think you also have.

Researcher: Then why do you think it is me holding a baby?

Boy: I think it's either you or Mr Han.

Researcher: And you thought it was a mother earlier. Why do you say it's a man now?

Boy: Well, I don't know whether it's a man or a woman.

Researcher: Maybe both men and women hold babies?

Boy: Yes!

(A boy from *Xuxi youeryuan*, Tianjin)

By openly discussing the questions, the above boy started to doubt whether a man or a woman holds babies - perhaps one example of gender-sensitive education in ECEC settings. It is also worth noting that this boy sometimes provided contradictory statements that a male practitioner who 'possess[es] some masculinity' can as well be 'caring' (a characteristic that is traditionally attached to 'femininity'), challenging the traditionally separated concepts of 'masculinity' and 'femininity'. Specifically, it also seemed that when children have had experiences of their men practitioners holding babies, they are more likely to shift traditional images of women being primary carers. Mr Hu from *Xiwang youeryuan* in Tianjin is a father himself and often mentioned his child to the pupils in his class - who then frequently mentioned this as a reason for why they thought it is a man practitioner holding a baby in the picture.

Lastly, children may also occasionally provide answers that cross gender boundaries or go beyond gender, or they may 'play' with gender. Here are a few examples:

Boy: It should be a woman teacher [holding a baby]. Because she is not as violent as a man.

Researcher: Could women be violent?

Boy: She must be a 'nv han zi'³² [a masculine female] then.

(A boy from Xuxi *youeryuan*, Tianjin)

Girl: It's mom holding a baby. [...]

Researcher: Which teacher then?

Girl: You (Mr Xu).

Researcher: But you said it looks like a mom.

Girl: (Laughing) And your voice sounds like a mom, because your voice is funny.

(A girl from Beiguan *youeryuan*, Tianjin)

Those two children reflected a view that men and women could possess traits of their opposite gender. Whereas some others would 'de-gender' their teachers (practitioners):

Neither Mr Hu or Miss He will hold a baby. They are teachers in the upper-level class and [only teachers in the lower-level classes will hold babies].

(A girl from Xiwang *youeryuan*, Tianjin)

Miss Tai will not hold babies. She has to teach, and is too busy to look after babies.

(A boy from Kuaile *youeryuan*, Tianjin)

Researcher: Do you think I can carry a baby or not?

Boy: No.

Researcher: Why not?

Boy: Because you are too thin.

Researcher: Do you think Phillip can carry a baby?

Boy: Yeah. [...] He has strong muscles.

Researcher: How about Connie and other teachers?

Boy: Yes. They also have strong muscles.

(A boy from Little Stars Nursery, Edinburgh)

Practitioners' work responsibilities and appearance, were listed above as two factors that override gender in children's answers.

Girl: I think it's a mother holding a baby. [...] Because she seems to be wearing high heels.

³² 'Nv han zi' is a word created in modern Chinese online community to describe females that do not possess traditional female traits. It is now widely used in Chinese society, positively and negatively. In a positive sense, it can mean that a woman is independent and does not depend on men. It can also be used derogatively to signify negative attitudes towards women who embody non-traditional female traits.

Researcher: How do you know she is wearing high heels?

Girl: I just do.

Researcher: What if this is one of the teachers?

Girl: It's either you or Mr Niu. [...] Because I think it looks like a boy. [...]

Researcher: But you just said it looks like a mother as she is wearing high heels?

Girl: Yes. I can change all the time.

(A girl from Beiguan *youeryuan*, Tianjin)

Girl: It is Mr Xu [the researcher] carrying Mr Cheung [the man teacher].

Researcher: Really?

Girl: [Laughing] Ha, I am joking. I know it is a mother holding a baby.

(A girl from Yan Oi Church Kindergarten, Hong Kong)

Here gender is regarded as a flexible category that children used situationally to make fun, and children do not necessarily think they have to have one 'fixed' answer/viewpoint to questions.

8.2 'Girls don't play football'? Gender stereotypes amongst young children

The second picture showing someone kicking a ball received overwhelmingly gendered feedback from boys and girls in Chinese kindergartens (Tianjin and Hong Kong), as can be seen from *Table 8-2*:

Table 8-2 Who is kicking a ball?

Answer	Edinburgh		Hong Kong		Tianjin		Overall (n = 280)
	% of Boys (n = 31)	% of Girls (n = 24)	% of Boys (n = 56)	% of Girls (n = 52)	% of Boys (n = 61)	% of Girls (n = 56)	
Man (<i>Dads, brothers, or male athletes</i>)	45.2%	37.5%	53.6%	55.8%	70.5%	69.6%	58.6%
Woman (<i>mothers or sisters</i>)	19.4%	25%	8.9%	5.8%	3.3%	7.1%	9.3%
Male practitioner	16.1%	45.8%	66.1%	69.2%	77%	80.4%	64.6%
Female practitioner	25.8%	20.8%	25%	11.5%	8.2%	12.5%	16.1%
Other	12.9%	12.5%	5.4%	11.5%	9.8%	5.4%	8.9%

Children frequently pointed out that boys play football and girls do not, because they normally see boys/men playing football on the playground, on TV, or in the

kindergartens. Selected quotes from this research demonstrated that Chinese children live in a strongly gendered community:

My mom usually takes me to the shopping centre and my dad plays football.

Footballers are always men, I've never seen female footballers.

Every time mom prepares us dinner and I play football with dad and uncle.

Boys like to play football and girls like to play volleyball. I've seen these on TV.

Men will look 'manly' when they play football. Women just do housework, and don't play football. [...] My mom told me about these things.

Boys often do sports. Girls only care about dressing [...].

Boys do sports a lot. Girls are girls and boys are boys. Girls often do housework. Boys need to work, so they don't need to do housework. [Who told you these?] Myself.

I saw those boys in the primary school play football, and girls skip rope.

(Children from kindergartens in Tianjin)

Girls don't kick balls. Because girls prefer dancing, or singing.

My dad does exercises every day. [How about your mom?] She just watches dad.

I always see boys play football on TV, rarely girls. Boys prefer balls and girls prefer dolls.

Girls don't do exercises. When my mom was ill, dad asked her to do exercises. But she still didn't do, and instead slept at home.

Girls don't kick balls because they don't want to get wet. It's dirty.

(Children from kindergartens in Hong Kong)

All those behaviours are commonly experienced by Chinese children in their daily life, which largely conform to traditional gender stereotypes in Chinese societies. Whether there is a need for Chinese parents and the wider society to become gender-aware in their daily communications with children, requires further investigation. Furthermore, such gender stereotypes are also reinforced in Chinese kindergartens (the percentages of boys and girls who said that it is a male

practitioner kicking a ball are as high as from 66.1% to 80.4% in Hong Kong and Tianjin), especially in contexts that male practitioners are widely expected to do more physical activities with children and to promote children's health. According to children's feedback in this research, men practitioners in both Tianjin and Hong Kong kindergartens are always PE teachers or those who lead physical activities like running, playing football, and many other exercises, reproducing gendered images of men and women.

A similar connection between gendered bodies and roles is also evident when children talked about picture 2. Many said that men can play football because they are physically strong, have short hair and wear trousers. Correspondingly, these children thought it is either inconvenient or difficult for women to play football or do other exercises because they have long hair, wear skirts and high heels, and are physically weak. This suggests that gender stereotypes as strongly bonded with perceived essential 'natural' difference, as well as expected ways of embodying gender, are perpetuating gender discourses that shape children's gender subjectivities.

In contrast, the above described gendered patterns were less evident among children from Edinburgh (although the numbers of children make it hard to make any strong statements about how generalizable this might be of wider social patterns). Although there still tended to be more children declaring that men/boys are more likely to kick balls than women/girls and a few mentioned reasons such as:

[Girls] are not allowed to play football, cause mummy said no. [...] Connie [the female practitioner] is a lady, she is not allowed [to play football].

(A girl from Little Stars Nursery)

Boys play football better than girls. [...] Sometimes I play with my dad in the park.

Sometimes they [girls] do [play football]. If they keep doing that, boys will laugh at her.

(A boy and a girl from Crewkerne Primary School Nursery Class)

the majority of boys and girls agreed that both men and women kick balls/play football. There was also little indication that children in Edinburgh would think

their male practitioners play ball more than female ones (16.1% boys and 45.8% girls said it is a male practitioner, and 25.8% boys and 20.8% girls said it is a female practitioner). Although there were only a small number of children in Edinburgh who participated in this conversational activity and even fewer were able to fully express themselves about their perceptions and experiences, some clues can still be identified regarding why children in Edinburgh might be less gender-stereotypical in describing picture 2 - compared to their peers in Tianjin and Hong Kong. First, as Edinburgh runs a key worker system in their ECEC settings, children might often name their key workers when indicating which practitioner is in the pictures. This suggests that child-practitioner relationships in Edinburgh may be affected by the key worker system from the children's end, whereas gender may be less important to them - as some participant practitioners assumed, because the children are so familiar with their key worker, this will then override any other influence to choose an answer purely on gender. Second, some practitioners in Edinburgh mentioned that they would intentionally challenge gender stereotypes through their interactions with children, for example by presenting both boys and girls with toys that are traditionally regarded as either boys' toys (ball, cars, guns, etc.) or girls' toys (dolls, trolleys, etc.) (Francis, 2010b; Lynch, 2015). Considering that many children talked about their experiences of kicking balls with both male and female practitioners, it can be assumed that practitioners' awareness of challenging gender stereotypes might have impacted on children's reflections in Edinburgh. Such impacts are also, to a limited extent, evident in Chinese children's conversations. Where children have had experiences playing ball with either their mothers, female practitioners or other women, they are more likely to accept the idea that girls also play ball. By looking at those differences between children's perceptions of playing ball in Edinburgh and the Chinese cities, it thus implies that practitioners' non-gender stereotypical behaviours, and even parents', will have the potential of opening up children's images of gender.

Lastly, there was occasional evidence that children would base their opinions beyond gender in picture 2, too. For instance, a boy from Kuaile *youeryuan* in Tianjin reported that his female teacher (practitioner), Miss Tai, knows how to play football because she practiced. Nevertheless, the boy doubted that his male teacher (practitioner), Mr Tang can play football - for the reason that Mr Tang is "too fat". Though not necessarily related to gender, bodily difference is again

used by children to connect with practitioners' behaviours. Another boy from Xuxi *youeryuan*, Tianjin made his judgement according to the practitioners' work responsibilities. He claimed that Mrs Ge, the 'care' practitioner who is always busy with housing responsibilities in the classroom, is too busy to play football; whilst Mr Han and Mrs Hua might possibly be able to play football with the children, due to their roles as teaching staff members that spend most of their time with children.

Children also revealed their agency in engaging with gendered discourses. When asked whether they like playing football themselves, there were both boys and girls from all three cities indicating that they are interested. Equally, both boys and girls sometimes suggested that they dislike playing football. Even though some girls said that girls do not play football, they like playing football themselves. This Tianjin girl below gave an example of how she is challenging gender stereotypes that boys are physically stronger and play football more than girls:

Girl: Boys play football more because they are physically stronger.

Researcher: Do you like playing football?

Girl: Yes. I like it.

Researcher: Do you think you are physically strong?

Girl: Yes, I think so. I can kick somebody away with only one kicking.

Researcher: But you are a girl.

Girl: But I do exercises. I will go jogging tonight. [...]

(A girl from Xuxi *youeryuan* in Tianjin)

The emerging evidence of children's agency in reacting to wider social structures suggests that children can be potential challengers to dominant gender discourses. Taking into account the limitations of not being able to fully explore children's perceptions in this study, a future project that explores children's agency in engaging with dominant discourses in Chinese and Scottish ECEC settings is desirable (as discussed in *Chapter 3*, there are similar studies from other contexts though).

8.3 'I like play because it is fun.' When practitioners' gender matters less

Children's conversations on the last picture of someone reading a story book confirmed that reading a book is culturally regarded as a slightly less gendered behaviour across the three cultures. Children have had experiences of both their men and women practitioners reading stories to them, and there was little pattern

that they would prefer practitioners of a particular gender in this regard. In some cases children may prefer one of his/her practitioners because that practitioner reads stories more often, or because he/she has a better relationship with the practitioner for various reasons that have little to do with gender (such as that the practitioner is less harsh on him/her, that the practitioner does not ask them to do homework, or that the practitioner is funny or is soft). Nonetheless, some gendered aspects picked up from the conversations are also noteworthy. To illustrate, some children from Tianjin and Hong Kong claimed that girls read books more than boys, because boys are tough and boisterous. This reflected a Chinese expectation that girls should be quiet and stay indoors (reading books, for example) and boys are allowed to go outside and be energetic. Though not evident from this current study, such an expectation is also reflected in some Scottish practitioners' perceptions of gender (Wingrave, 2016). Another boy from Tianjin said that:

It's a girl reading a book. Boys do not read, because boys develop later than girls. It must be a girl, girls are smarter. Boys tend to think about things that are irrelevant [to study].

(A boy from Xiwang *youeryuan*, Tianjin)

His words pointed to internalization of another traditional understanding of children in China that boys are usually delayed in their development comparing to girls, thus are less 'mature' and hardly follow adults' orders (such as to study hard). Again, Scottish practitioners in Wingrave's (2016) study revealed a similar construction of gender subjectivity, pointing to a potential source where children might pick up those discourses. Both examples add to the gendered stereotypes discussed earlier in this chapter. Some Chinese girls/boys further mentioned that they prefer a female/male practitioner to read them stories because 'we are both girls/boys', 'we are alike'. This suggests that some children might relate to practitioners of the same gender more in terms of their daily interactions.

Some other gendered aspects are again, related to gender embodiment (Renold, 2000). A girl from Beiguan *youeryuan* in Tianjin liked her man practitioner, Mr Niu, to read stories because he is handsome (she further added that her women practitioners are beautiful); another girl preferred the female practitioner, Mrs Nie, as 'Mrs Nie is more beautiful'. Children seem to have started conversations around 'sexualisation' and 'heterosexual relationships' from the early years as

both this research and Renold (2000; 2003; & 2006) note(d). However, this research further suggests that such conversations are not always ‘heterosexual’ as reflected by Chinese boys and girls. A boy from Hong Kong preferred his male practitioner Mr Ngai, because Mr Ngai is handsome. Another Hong Kong boy added that: ‘I like boys because I like *** [a boy in his class]’. A Tianjin boy from Chechen *youeryuan* described his preferred practitioner, Mr Bai, as ‘beautiful’; and another boy from Xuxi *youeryuan* emphasized that he likes particularly young men but not women. The latter boy’s parents and practitioners were aware of this, but had no clue to why he prefers only young men. And it did not seem to have bothered them when the boy is at such a small age, according to the boy’s practitioners (and implying that if the child were older, they would be ‘worried’). What those findings can tell may be open to interpretations. To some extent, it demonstrates possibilities of a ‘sexualized’ but diverse (not necessarily ‘heterosexual’) environment in ECEC settings (Renold, 2000; 2003; & 2006; Holford et al., 2013; Huuki & Renold, 2016).

Another aspect of gender embodiment relates to voices. A number of Chinese children mentioned that their women practitioners’ voices are softer when they explained why they preferred their women practitioners to read them stories. A few others including both Chinese and Scottish children, were more interested in men practitioners’ ‘funny’ voices. Such distinctions between women’s and men’s voices were especially evident in Xuxi *youeryuan*, Tianjin, where some boys and girls described Mr Han’s voice as scary:

Mrs Hua’s voice is very soft, more suitable for reading stories. Mr Han always scares us when he reads stories. He is a man.

Mrs Hua’s voice is softer, and Mr Han’s voice often scares us. His voice is very scary. [...]

(A boy and a girl from Xuxi *youeryuan*, Tianjin)

The above children’s explanations link to the points that some Chinese male practitioners think they are not good at using ‘child-friendly’ languages to speak to children (see *Chapter 7, Section 7.3*). Three male practitioners (Mr Hu from Tianjin, Mr Chin from Hong Kong and Gavin from Edinburgh) further mentioned that they had to be careful with their voice or even deliberately spoke in soft

ways, implying that practitioners are expected to be gender sensitive and versatile in their interactions with children (Warin, 2017).

In addition to the three pictures, children were further asked about their favourite activities with each of their practitioners at the end of the conversations. Generally speaking, children like to do all kinds of activities with their practitioners, ranging from playing games, reading, writing, paper cutting, housekeeping, drawing, dancing, chatting to many others. Gender seems to matter less in deciding which activities to do with a particular practitioner, as long as those activities are regarded as fun and enjoyable by different children. The vast majority of children from all three cities love all of their practitioners and like to have fun with their practitioners. Sometimes children's favourite activities with male and female practitioners can be constructed in gendered ways by the children, mainly because the practitioners initiated those gendered activities. For example, children from Tianjin and Hong Kong may enjoy doing sports with male practitioners, because male practitioners are PE teachers and often do sports with them. Correspondingly, their favourite activities with female practitioners can be dancing, because female practitioners always dance with them. These then mirror the gender stereotypes discussed earlier in this chapter, as children may say things like:

Miss Tso always dances with us. Girls have talents in dancing. Girls do girl stuff and boys do boy stuff.

(A girl from Yau Oi Kindergarten, Hong Kong)

I play games with Mr Fok because he is a boy. [...] I chat with Ms Choi.

(A boy from Baptist Chi Sang School, Hong Kong)

[I like] dancing and singing with Miss Bao. Girls are naturally unable to run or kick balls, and can only sing and dance.

(A girl from Chenchen youeryuan, Tianjin)

A girl from Edinburgh likes her male practitioner Philip, to lift her up high above his head, which is also stereotypical (as will be explored in *Chapter 9, Section 9.3.2*, lifting and big movements are commonly observed interactions between male practitioners and the children). Such stereotypes were merely minimally evident though, when having fun and enjoying time with their practitioner

‘friends’ are deemed to be the most important by the children - mirroring what Hutchings and others (2008) found in their study with primary school children that being nice, kind, smart and funny are characteristics that children like and want to emulate in their practitioners of both genders.

Specifically, there were also some dynamics in children’s relationships with their practitioners. A Tianjin boy from Kuaile *youeryuan* said that his relationships with the practitioners are situational:

Sometimes I will be close friend with Mr Tang, sometimes I will prefer Miss Tai. It’s all changeable, and can be either teacher.

Children’s ‘instability’ in their preferences to practitioners was also acknowledged by some practitioners interviewed in this research, who pointed out that ‘when children say he/she likes a practitioner, it doesn’t mean he/she does not like other practitioners. Maybe the answers will be different when you ask them the next minute.’ Some other Tianjin boys and girls, further provided their unique attributes to their relationships with the practitioners:

I like both Mrs Nie and Mrs Qi [the ‘care’ practitioner]. But Mr Niu... sometimes he wouldn’t allow me to leave food in my plate, so I am a bit not liking him now. I like Mrs Qi best because every time she allows me to leave a little. I can be too full occasionally, and can’t take any more [...]

(A girl from Beiguan *youeryuan*, Tianjin)

I like Mr Hu most. He is not as fierce as other teachers, and he doesn’t really beat us - he just says so. [.....] Miss He is more fierce and she often tells us off.

(A girl from Xiwang *youeryuan*, Tianjin)

I don’t like Mr Hu, so I don’t do ANYTHING with him. [Why?] I am feeling vengeful to him. [...] Because he is often angry with me, because I do not listen to him. [You can tell him not to be angry, and promise that you will listen?] No, I will never surrender. I am very grumpy. [I don’t think you are grumpy.] I am the grumpiest one in our kindergarten. [...]

(A boy from Xiwang *youeryuan*, Tianjin)

All those children’s stories can suggest that practitioner-child relationships in kindergartens are dynamically constructed and ‘performed’ through interaction. The different attitudes to Mr Hu above match with Mr Hu’s own interpretations in Chapter 7, Section 7.4.3 that he would treat girls and boys differently and is

harsher on boys. Consequently, children respond interactively to practitioners' gendered attitudes.

8.4 Practitioners' reflections on whether children differentiate their male and female practitioners

Having explored children's perceptions of their practitioners' gender, this section now turns to discuss how practitioners reflected on children's (gendered) interactions with them. Mirroring the children's views, there is a tendency that practitioners from Hong Kong and Tianjin were more likely than their Edinburgh fellows to believe that children interact with male and female practitioners in different ways. I have already explained that the key worker system in Scotland plays a significant role in practitioner-child relationships when Scottish children talked about their relationships with the practitioners. Such influence was also frequently mentioned in the practitioners' reflections, minimising the impact of gender in their interactions with children. Beyond this, Scottish participant practitioners recognised a variety of factors that might have influenced children's responses to their practitioners. For instance, Gavin said that his relationships with the children were influenced by both the long period he spent with the kids and his role as a deputy manager:

It differentiates from individuals. I think the variables here are awkward for you. I've been here for five years so my kids are now in my green group, a lot of them I knew as babies. So automatically I'm a safe person to be. And the other variable is I am sometimes stepping back off the floor, and trying to build up those relationships with the other staff so that the kids go to them more. Do they go gender-specific? No. I would like to say no.

(Gavin, Male, Section Five Nursery, Edinburgh)

Supporting Gavin's statements, Heather from the same nursery further unfolded the significance of spending time with children:

I think it's just to spend most of the time with them. If you've got someone, either male or female who is out of the room for a longer time, the person in the room is gonna get the most attention of kids, more requests, more invites to play. So I think it's just the amount of time you spend with the children.

(Heather, Female, Section Five Nursery, Edinburgh)

Also denying that children are gendered in their interactions with practitioners, Alice explained why two particular girls would not come to her:

I don't think children are gendered [in their interactions]. It's just what we [as practitioners] give back to the children. [...] I think one [girl] doesn't get her way with me because I'm less likely to let her have what she wants. And the other child she is just not emotionally managing. She had bond [built] the relationship with the others where she feels secure, and she has not bond [built] that relationship with me. If that child is not emotionally stable, they can only bond [in] relationships with one or two people.

(Alice, Female, Glastonbury Early Years Centre, Edinburgh)

Alice's observations correspond well with what was described above as children constructing and 'performing' relationships through interaction, and suggest that children will adapt their interactions based upon how each practitioner treats them - an important factor that contributes to the dynamics in practitioner-child relationships. Alice's reflections also contradict some other participants' (for example, Connie and Philip from Little Stars Nursery and Jenny from Guild Early Years Centre), who interpreted that children think female practitioners are more of a 'pushover' and would therefore respond to male practitioners better in terms of orders and requests. This contradiction can be related to what has been discussed in *Chapter 7*, that individuals of the same gender may have different subjectivities. It can be even more complicated when some children might bring in their own experiences of gender when interacting with the practitioners - for instance, children might hold the perceptions that women are more of a 'pushover' due to their experiences outside school, and might thus interact with their male and female practitioners in different ways. Amy from Crewkerne Primary School Nursery Class reported about how children might be gendered in their initial experiences with the practitioners, but can shift their reactions through time:

When [John, the male practitioner] first started in this nursery, there was one child that would not go near him. I think it was his height, and she was so small. [...] [S]he would be like crying on him. But I think "go down the level a wee bit more, you should get down [on] your knees, cause I think you are too tall for her". I told him to try that and see if it works. Then she gradually came to him. [...] I think because me and John are the full time members of staff, they may [have] more time with us, because we are there full-time. But I don't think it makes a difference between the two of us. If we are all for something we are both for them. Any member of staff.

(Amy, Crewkerne Primary School Nursery Class, Edinburgh)

Her colleague, John, similarly noticed those different experiences among children. He described a boy who may not speak to women when he first started in the classroom and a girl who would never allow John to get close to him at the beginning (both children have their mothers and fathers and the practitioners reported no clue to the phenomena - the practitioners just regarded these as their individualities). And through a certain period of effort and interaction, both children settled to treat male and female practitioners the same.

Another practitioner, Carl, provided a different reflection on dealing with children's gendered experiences brought into the nursery:

Researcher: [D]o you think that children may have different expectations from you and the other female staff?

Carl: Yeah, I think so. In that sort of rough and tumble style way. They would have more rough and tumble [with me], they climb on you and things like that.

Researcher: Why do you think is that?

Carl: [...] It might be their experiences with their dads, or other males in their life. That's what a man does you know. You would climb on them, we roll around, we kick the football in. And that's quite stereotypical as well. And I don't want I [me] just be like that. I'll give them that if they need it. Cause I'll get some time *** [a boy] climb on my back and that, I know he does that with his dad, cause I've seen that happen. So he is doing exactly with me what he does with his dad. Well, I want this environment to replicate his home environment as well, so I'm quite happy to do that as well.

(Carl, Male, Falm Early Years Centre, Edinburgh)

Having explained that he does not himself initiate gender-stereotypical behaviours in his interactions with children, Carl also regarded it as necessary to cater for children's gendered needs. Although it could be argued that Carl's response might reproduce gender stereotypes, he also pointed to the ethos of meeting children's needs that is dominant in Scottish educational cultures (Scottish Government, 2014). Carl's reflections also provided insights into the gendered interactions of rough and tumble between children and male practitioners - a significant aspect of practitioner-child interactions observed in all three cultures. I will explore this in further depth in *Chapter 9*.

Laura, who works with Carl in the centre, also reflected on the same things and referred to children's own experiences as reasons for their different treatments to Carl and herself:

They are maybe a wee bit tougher with Carl and they may come to me if they are more upset. For example, whenever Carl is, [...] children will try jump on his back. They don't really do that with me. I don't know if that's associated with their dad about rough and play. Because Colin is not initiating that, he is not saying: "Climb on me." They will come to him and climb on him. I [also] think Carl can relate sometimes to *** (a boy) at the corner. Because *** was brought up just with his dad, I think [he] responds to Carl better sometimes. I have a good relationship with [him] but still he will go to Carl more. And sometimes like yesterday I heard him saying, 'daddy, oh Carl.' So he got them mixed up. [...] He has never said mommy to me. There is just his daddy in his life, and I think with dad sometimes can be rough and tumble. He does offer maybe cuddle and things, and I find [him] responds better when I'm a bit rough and tumble as well. Because he can relate to that. So I think it is just what children experience.

(Laura, Female, Falm Early Years Centre, Edinburgh)

Raymond and Sean then provided a context specific to deprived areas in Edinburgh (at least from their perspective), from where most Edinburgh participant settings were selected:

Researcher: Do you think the children may have different expectations from you and the other female colleagues?

Raymond: Probably. They've seen their dads, or mom's partners acting a different way from the mom, and through my experiences the moms are scared of their male partner. The child then treat the mom differently from treat the dad. The man is the boss, the man is in control. They have to do what the man says.

(Raymond, Male, Crawley Early Years Centre)

It could be they've got close relationships with their fathers at home, they become more attached to me than other female staff in the room, could in the other way about what's missing from the home life. Every child has their own personal circumstances and that rules on how they respond to me. A lot to do with whether they have a father or not. One of the children in this room, she was abused by a male relative, she was absolutely terrified when I was working with her in her room for two weeks, she couldn't go near me. So her response to men has been shaped by her previous experience. Could be things as serious as that. Sometimes it's just what their personality determines.

(Sean, Male, Guild Early Years Centre, Edinburgh)

Those statements suggested a shared subjectivity of viewing gender as interactive among many Scottish participants - that children ‘perform’ their interactions with male (and female) practitioners according to previous experiences with men (and women). In addition, as mentioned in earlier chapters, one important reason for Scottish early years centres to have men as practitioners is to show the children men can be nurturing and to help children deal with different men figures in their future life. This again can be related to Scottish educational values of meeting children’s unique needs. Gavin, from Section Five Nursery, added other examples of how children should be placed in the first place in practitioner-child interactions:

[T]here are a couple of [women] staff who are quite scared of spiders, that’s where we had to really pull them aside and say, look that’s not fair on the children, because you are passing your fears on to them. So I would go to do that for them. So I suppose in that way, that is maybe a gender thing a little bit but we just had to say to staff that you have to show children how to behave, you can’t be shying away or they are going to shy away. I think it’s more down to attitude, to character. That’s probably more of what I’ve based on [...]

Gavin: Maybe two kids who are a wee bit shy with me, and they would prefer to go to the girls. I’m quite loud and ...

Researcher: Why is that?

Gavin: It’s just my personality I guess.

Researcher: No, I mean why these two specific children?

Gavin: I think they are wee more shy, as much as I can work with that. Sometimes it’s just easier to let them go to where would naturally forward to. Say Heather [the female practitioner] is very gentle, calm and caring, so sometimes I feel the shyer ones will go to her. It doesn’t always happen, and if it is my key group, obviously I just made the effort to go down to their level, to maybe be a little bit calmer when they are in the room. [...]

(Gavin, Male, Section Five Nursery, Edinburgh)

As reported by participant practitioners in *Chapter 7*, some participants were themselves raised up in gendered discourses and are thus gendered in their subjectivities. Raising their awareness and sensitivity of how practitioners can be gendered in their perceptions and/or behaviours and in what ways practitioners’ gendered attitudes and/or interactions can have impacts on children need to be the first step, followed by a second step of trying to challenge their own genderedness. As far as this research tells, it is suggested that this process could be interactive and practitioners and children might mutually influence on each other, as well as jointly challenge gender stereotypes.

Similar to Edinburgh practitioners, many Hong Kong practitioners also depicted considerably how children might interact with their practitioners in gendered ways as a result of their experiences at the family home. Below are some selected examples:

Children would sometimes prefer men teachers, possibly because there is few in the kindergarten. Some children's fathers might come back home very late in the night. Children thus have less opportunities to interact with men adults and like to play more with me when they come to the kindergarten. [...] There are also children from lower-level classes who I have not taught or those who are new to the kindergarten that can become scared when they see me. Maybe it's because they don't know me, and they usually see women more.

(Mr Ngai, Hong Tak Nursery School, Hong Kong)

Children can be more respectful when communicating with men teachers. Because [it is believed that] fathers are usually the strict one at home who will shout at children or beat them. Surely Mr Fok do not shout or beat, but children may be more respectful to him.

(Ms Choi, Baptist Chi Sang School, Hong Kong)

Having expressed his unwillingness to be used as a father figure to 'scare' children by other female colleagues, Mr Fok indicated how some practitioners are purposefully exploiting children's gendered experiences. Here I wish to point out the differences between how practitioners in Edinburgh and Hong Kong examples respond to children's gendered experiences. With the former endeavouring to challenge and the latter to reproduce them, it might make some sense regarding the pattern that children from Hong Kong hold more gender-stereotypical views than their Edinburgh peers.

Hong Kong practitioners also recognized children's agency and responsiveness in adjusting their responses to different practitioners' styles and expectations. As Mr Ngai and Mr Cheung said:

The children would behave differently based on different teachers' requirements, and will not differentiate you by your gender. Perhaps they will be more relaxed when having classes with me and pay less attention to their routinized behaviours, but will follow Ms Wah's instructions in her classes as Ms Wah has higher expectations. They know very well about different teachers' expectations.

(Mr Ngai, Hong Tak Nursery School, Hong Kong)

Children are more relaxed towards me, because I play with them a lot. I know they will behave themselves when with Mrs Woo.

(Mr Cheung, Yan Oi Church Kindergarten, Hong Kong)

My personality and my teaching style are stricter. I will be a bit serious when talking to the kids. So they know if they want to play, they go to Mr Cheung. If it is about study, they will come to me first. They know it well - playing with Mr Cheung, studying with me.

(Mrs Woo, Yan Oi Church Kindergarten, Hong Kong)

Apart from the above aspects, a certain number of Hong Kong participants also agreed that children will not differentiate their practitioners by gender, as long as practitioners make them feel safe and happy (Francis et al., 2008; Hutchings et al., 2008), and teach them knowledge. By contrast, other practitioner participants believed that boys and girls will respond differently to men and women practitioners, citing a traditional Chinese saying that “Like poles repel, unlike poles attract”. This saying suggests how heteronormativity plays an important role in interactions between men and women, which is believed by Hong Kong participants to be evident between children and their practitioners (especially between girls and men practitioners):

Girls really like men teachers, it is very obvious. Boys and girls both like female teachers, but girls might show a preference to men. They think men are physically stronger. For example, in PE classes they see Mr Chin jumping or lifting heavy things, and will say: “Wow, it’s awesome!” Those girls will therefore go to Mr Chin when they want to reach a high place, or ask Mr Chin to lift them. They think I won’t have the physical strength to lift them, so will not come to me. The boys will go to either me or Mr Chin, but the girls only go to Mr Chin, it’s very obvious.

(Ms Yau, HKTA Tuen Wan Kindergarten, Hong Kong)

[Girls] will be more attracted by Mr Cheung, the opposite gender. I am not that attractive.

(Mrs Woo, Yan Oi Church Kindergarten, Hong Kong)

Sometimes if I ask the kids to do something, girls may act coquettishly and use coquettish voices. It’s very funny. They act coquettishly to me as they do to their fathers. Some boys may do that as well. But it’s different with female teachers, they rarely coquet to female teachers, especially girls.

(Mr Fok, Baptist Chi Sang School, Hong Kong)

Those statements match with children's responses above in that children will play around heteronormative relationships with their practitioners to achieve what they want. Practitioners from Tianjin also noted this, and pointed out that heteronormativity becomes more transparent when there are both man and woman practitioners in the classroom:

I think many girls would like men teachers, and boys would like women teachers. You can see the difference when there are both men and women teachers in the classroom. It appears to me that girls may feel shy when talking to Mr Bai. You can sense that. But the girls may regard me as a mother figure and they have fun with me, talk loudly with me. It does not seem to bother them. With Mr Bai they will be shy, step backwards, or cover their mouth. [...] And boys may sometimes be shy with women teachers. I think they might feel that they are grown-ups and there are some things that they feel embarrassing if mention them to girls. Again, you can sense that.

(Ms Bao, Female, Chenchen *youeryuan*, Tianjin)

The boys in our class may appear reluctant when women teachers want to hug them. [...] As they grow up, they are aware that they are boys and need to keep their distance with girls.

(Miss Tai, Female, Kuaile *youeryuan*, Tianjin)

Our girls will act coquettishly to Mr Hu when they are asked to train about dancing. They will say things like 'my hands are sore' to him, [...] but not to women teachers. [...] Whereas boys feel more intimate with women teachers, as women teachers are often softer. It's also about opposite genders attract.

(Miss He, Female, Xiwang *youeryuan*, Tianjin)

Practitioners also reflected on Chinese children's strong biases about physical strengths:

Children normally go to the man teacher for physical work, like changing the water tank. Especially during outdoor activities, they would prefer the man teacher to play with. But if the man teacher is not present, they will still interact with us.

(Miss Tai, Female, Kuaile *youeryuan*, Tianjin)

Another important factor that affects child-practitioner relationships in Tianjin is the system that there is a lead practitioner, an assistant practitioner, and a 'care' practitioner (whose main jobs include for example, housekeeping, table cleaning, meal serving, etc., see *Chapter 5*) in the classroom. As the leading practitioner is

usually the one who is in charge of the classroom, practitioners agreed that children will pick up on this and respond accordingly:

I think children are very clever. They may know that I am the master of this class and my words count, and would thus respond to me better.

(Ms Bao, Female, Chenchen *youeryuan*, Tianjin)

I think children tend to seek me for everything. [...] They might know that I am NO.1 in this classroom.

(Mr Hu, Male, Xiwang *youeryuan*, Tianjin)

Children also differentiate practitioners according to their different roles, when they talked about their favourite activities with each practitioner. This is supported by the practitioners' observations with one example below:

Because the man teacher in our class has a different role as a 'care' teacher, children would mostly see him doing physical work. Maybe if he were a class teacher, children would have more expectations from him. As he is just a 'care' teacher, children would seek less help from him regarding games or studies.

(Miss Tai, Female, Kuaile *youeryuan*, Tianjin)

This specific working system in Tianjin, together with the key worker system in Edinburgh, suggest that institutional cultures are closely connected to child-practitioner relationships.

Lastly, Tianjin practitioner participants also acknowledged that it is most important for children to react to practitioners situationally. Children's agency in making their own judgements and choices was again revealed by practitioners. One typical example is provided below:

I think it depends on whom children think can be helpful. They have their own judgements. It can be that they think it is better to discuss with Ms Bao about one issue, and with Mr Bai about another. Or sometimes if they don't get what they want from one teacher, they will turn to another. For instance, I often tell them to solve the problems themselves first when they come to me. Some might not want to do it him-/herself, and will then go find another teacher. [...]

(Ms Bao, Female, Chenchen *youeryuan*, Tianjin)

So far, we have seen that practitioners' reflections match significantly with what children have talked about in relation to their practitioners. There also seems to

be a connection between practitioners' attitudes/reactions to and children's perceptions of gender, particularly when cross-cultural comparisons were conducted. Before moving on to summarize the dynamics of gender interactions in this chapter, there are some further findings on practitioners' reflections about parental attitudes to be presented.

8.5 Practitioners' reflections on parental expectations

Evidence from children's research activities in this study partially suggested that children are exposed to strongly gendered experiences at the family home and in the related wider communities (Sumsion, 2005) in all Scottish, Hong Kong, and Mainland Chinese societies. It therefore leads to a necessity to investigate in detail parental attitudes to gender and the relevant impacts on children's experiences in future research. Although this research failed to include parents' perceptions due to its already substantial scale, it is hoped that practitioners' reflections on parental expectations would be able to capture some insights into wider pictures of gender discourses in the researched cultures.

According to those reflections, there appeared to be paradoxical responses from parents cross-culturally (in participant practitioners' opinions). They apparently on the one hand have concerns over men taking up a traditionally female occupation and can be also apparently suspicious of men's abilities to be caring and meticulous. Many parents were even reported by some participants to resist men practitioners changing their children's (especially girls') nappies. On the other hand, parents were said to also welcome men working in ECEC as they expect men practitioners to provide children with a gender-balanced environment and to model for children (especially boys) the desired ways of being a man. Both the concerns and expectations reflected are indicative of gender stereotypical and dichotomous discourses that embrace different roles and characteristics in men and women, with little or no differentiations from culture to culture. It is also suggestive that those discourses are evidently influencing children's perceptions of gender as shown in this study, pointing to the necessity of shifting parents' gender subjectivities as a key incentive for gender transformation (Warin, 2017) in ECEC.

Having said that, practitioners in this research also recognized that parents care about their children's needs and experiences in the centres/kindergartens/nurseries most, and will build up trust and relationships with any practitioners who are approachable, communicable, experienced, and have nice personalities. With all practitioners in this research reporting that men practitioners are (gradually) gaining trust from parents, it is implied that men's presence in ECEC settings has the potential of shifting gender stereotypes of the wider society. But as I keep saying, it requires a more sophisticated exploration into the complexities and dynamics of parents' gender subjectivities, as well as how parents influence gender transformation (ibid) in ECEC.

8.6 Summary

To summarize this chapter, children's views as expressed in this research suggest that holding babies, kicking balls and reading books are still culturally regarded as either more or less gendered behaviours associated with men and women separately. More importantly, such gendered portrayals are found to be reproduced socially and cross-generationally from as young as in the early years. It is assumed that children's experiences with their wider societies outside the ECEC settings, especially with their primary carer/parents, may have had vital impacts on children's perceptions of gender. Within the ECEC settings, practitioners (both men and women) may have the opportunity to challenge children's established gender perceptions through gender reflective and sensitive practices; whereas gender-blind or gender stereotypical practices are found to be reproducing traditional gender structures. As shown from this research, practitioners from Edinburgh reported more examples of challenging children's gender stereotypes than their counterparts from Tianjin and Hong Kong, taking into consideration for example, the Scottish discourses that men practitioners are needed in ECEC to challenge traditional images of being a man and the Chinese discourses that men are expected to improve children's physical health and to teach boys cultural conceptualisations of masculinity.

Chapter 9 Gender dynamics and performativity in practitioner-child interactions in ECEC

Having explored practitioners' and children's perceptions of gender in *Chapters 7 & 8*, this chapter will report the researcher's observations of daily practitioner-child interactions in participant ECEC settings. Interpretations of the observational data will be linked to participants' self-reported reflections, to find out how their gender subjectivities were 'performed' in practices. Practitioner-child interactions are grouped into several frequent topics in this research including some context-specific ones. Namely, these include: using gender as a rule/category in classroom organization and in allocating workforce responsibilities, gendered styles in practitioner-child interactions (in terms of aspects such as communication, rough and tumble play, discipline, 'informing/snitching', physical contact, caring relations and pedagogical practices) and gender relationality. Other gendered incidences that do not necessarily fit in those themes/topics, will also be discussed.

9.1 Gender as a rule in ECEC classrooms

During my visits to kindergartens in Tianjin and Hong Kong there were hardly any open discussions on gender among the practitioners and children. The only instance I record is an incident where Miss Tso (at Yau Oi Kindergarten) reported that there would be activities introducing boys' and girls' 'outlooks' at the start of each term. Being assumed by adult practitioners to be normal and beyond discussion, these activities usually reproduced gendered images of boys having short hair and girls having long hair and wearing skirts (this could be one possible explanation to children's descriptions of gendered bodies in *Chapter 8, Section 8.1*). Nevertheless, gender was observed to be a frequent category used to organize daily activities. Girls and boys may sometimes be separated by the practitioners to do different activities, or to take turns to do the same activities. For example, boys may follow men practitioners in participating in Chinese martial arts, and girls would dance with women practitioners. Boys were asked to play in the construction house and girls in the 'ladies' house. Gender is particularly used in Chinese kindergartens as a way of dividing children into smaller groups where necessary, and the participant practitioners interpreted this organization as 'easy and convenient'. Everyday children need to line up as a boys' group and a girls'

group for outdoor activities and toilets/washing up. In some classrooms, there are even signs on the floor indicating where boys and girls should stand. Those signs can either be a pink line (for the girl) and a blue line (for the boy) on each side, or a girl's cartoon with braid and a boy's with short hair; confirming gender stereotypes regarding colour and outlook. Additionally, it is usually the man practitioner leading the boys' line and the woman practitioner leading the girls' line. This suggests how the binary construction of gender might actually be enhanced when men work alongside women in ECEC settings in China - either consciously or subconsciously.

In some cases, however, the numbers of boys and girls were not always the same in a class. And some boys or girls might be put into the group of their opposite gender so that the numbers are even in each group. One practitioner particularly mentioned that it is usually the smaller boys that will be put into the girls' group, indicating an intersection between gender and physical size. I once saw a Tianjin boy being laughed at by another boy when the former was put in the girls' group. Some practitioners also reported that boys and girls may resist joining a different gender group, but will accept the arrangement once the practitioners' (teachers') authority was emphasized. Nevertheless, the 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 are well aware of the gender divide as evident in this research, it might require future investigations into how children's gender subjectivities may be negotiated under such circumstances.

In Tianjin kindergartens, some practitioners were also observed to initiate competitions between girls and boys in order to motivate the children to do the activity more efficiently or to discipline them. For instance, boys and girls were once asked to race against each other in a running activity in Kuaile *youeryuan*. In all other kindergartens, boys' and girls' groups were often compared to each other by the practitioners to see which group performed better (particularly when the practitioners tried to discipline the children). Such competitions were not observed in Hong Kong, as I was told by the participants that competitions of any form are not encouraged in Hong Kong kindergartens (see *Chapter 10, Section 10.3* for a further discussion on this).

Another gender-related arrangement observed in Chinese kindergartens is concerned about children's use of toilets. Based on different facilities, kindergartens in Tianjin and Hong Kong may have either separated or shared toilets for boys and girls (in the latter case girls and boys usually take turns to use the toilet). Where boys' and girls' toilets are separate, men practitioners were only allowed into boys' toilets but women practitioners can get into both boys' and girls'. Where boys and girls share the toilet, men practitioners were often not allowed into - so as to protect both the children and the men practitioners. This segregation is related to the increasing sensitivity towards men's contacts with younger children (especially girls) in Mainland Chinese and Hong Kong cultures, and manifests a common discourse across cultures that men teachers/practitioners are always suspicious in relation to child protection issues (Skelton, 2003; Peeters, et al., 2015; Tennhoff, et al., 2015). Whilst the Chinese kindergartens' strategy in responding to this discourse was consistently avoiding men practitioners approaching girls (or all children) in the toilet, their Scottish counterparts were seemed to be challenging it. Scottish men practitioners in this research were all involved in washroom responsibilities such as changing nappies, as were their women colleagues. Even though there were occasionally some reluctance/concerns expressed by a few parents, the managers and other colleagues in the settings have shown joint efforts in helping parents understand that men practitioners are as trustable as women practitioners, and all job responsibilities are shared among staff members and should have no separation by gender. The majority of parents seemed to support these, except on one occasion where a parent insisted that the man practitioner should not change her girl's nappy (she stated her objection was due to her religious beliefs).

Other than the minimally reflected gender separation concerning whether men practitioners should change girls' nappies or not, gendered organization seemed to be far less transparent in Scottish ECEC settings than in Tianjin and Hong Kong. Participants in Scottish settings stated that they may also intentionally challenge gender stereotypes and promote gender diversity and equality through daily activities. To illustrate, the practitioner from Little Stars Nursery said that they paid particular attention to make sure 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 in many occasions that boys played with baby trolleys and/or wearing dresses in the role play area - an incidence that was hardly found in Chinese kindergartens.

Nonetheless, gender blindness in regards to practitioners' daily organization was still sometimes evident in Scottish settings. There was once observed in Crewkerne Primary School Nursery Class when girls and boys were asked to leave the room in turn by gender, as well as once when children were asked to count the numbers of boys and girls. Although the practitioners later explained that they only randomly used gender, among other categories, as a way of separating the children into smaller groups (other categories may include for example, colours of children's coats), the binary gender divide was evidenced to be affecting children's interactions. I observed in Crewkerne in a late afternoon that, when children were sit on the floor waiting to be picked up, a boy asked another boy to sit around him: 'Can you come over here? This is a boy thing and that is a girl thing'. In Guild Early Years Centre, I also noticed that when children lined up for lunch in a separate room, it was often a girl paired up with a boy. However, the practitioner denied that they used gender to pair the children up. Instead, it usually depends on the children's behaviours and characteristics - some children are more active than the others and should therefore be separated to avoid messiness and conflicts. Again, an intersection between gender and perceived personality is reflected here. Lastly, as the only nursery class recruited in this research that is attached to a primary school, Crewkerne also required the children to address their practitioners as 'Mr' or 'Mrs' mirroring the way it works in the primary classes. Practitioners from other nurseries or centres were also sometimes heard to address the children by 'Mr' or 'Mrs'. All those incidences may likely reproduce gender dichotomy in Scottish ECEC settings.

Some other gendered arrangements observed in Chinese ECEC settings include for example, in Baptist Chi Sang School in Hong Kong, Mr Fok the man practitioner, were designated as a key worker to only boys in his class; so that he can avoid reporting to girls' parents. In HKTA Tuen Wan Kindergarten, Mr Chin was allocated to work with a woman practitioner (Ms Yau) who is regarded by the head teacher to be less feminine and gender-neutral in her interpersonal style. The head teacher believed that this arrangement is appropriate and necessary when there

is a man practitioner in the kindergarten - so that the man practitioner is unlikely to 'have crush' on the female practitioner. Such an assumption can be argued to be influenced by normative heterosexuality and normative notions about what is 'attractive' in each gender (Butler, 1990 & 2004). In Xiwang *youeryuan*, children were each presented a graduation cup and Mr Hu particularly pointed out that girls should be given pink cups - as required by the head teacher (and maybe due to parents' expectations). Similarly, in Hong Kong's Baptist Chi Sang School, a female practitioner specified to Mr Fok that blue baskets should be given to boys and pink to girls. There were suggestions in all three cultures, although to a differing extent, that internal gender segregation in terms of boys' and girls' daily activities is evident in ECEC settings and men's participation in Chinese kindergartens is highly likely to further enhance such segregation.

At the same time, the gendered arrangements in Chinese kindergartens were also regarded as a strategy to protect men practitioners. Mr Cheung from Hong Kong pointed out that he once led the girls' group when they returned from outdoor activities and headed to the toilet. The girls then asked Mr Cheung whether he is taking them to the boys' toilet. Later in the day the children kept discussing this for fun and Mr Cheung was afraid that they might send misleading information to their parents when they go home. As a result, he then tended to only lead boys' groups to avoid confusions. Possibly due to the 'marketization' of ECEC in Hong Kong (Campbell-Barr et al., 2013), Mr Cheung was acting as if he could be observed/judged by parents, even though they are not there. This could be understood as a variation on Foucault's (1985) 'panopticon' - that the society is self-disciplined under surveillance.

Children picked up using gender as a rule, too. Once a boy in Tianjin allowed me to sit on his bed when I did the research activities with him, indicating that he only allowed me to sit on his bed because I am 'the same gender'. Another Tianjin girl would not allow boys to touch her hair, as they are 'the different gender.'

9.2 Gendered responsibilities in ECEC workforce

Using gender as a rule to organize the classrooms and activities also means that men and women practitioners' workforce responsibilities can sometimes be different. I already mentioned above that men and women practitioners may take

boys and girls to the toilet separately, and often lead the respective groups during activities. Another specific separation in Chinese kindergartens is that women practitioners always take the responsibility of combing the girls' hair. In Tianjin and Hong Kong kindergartens, children usually start school at 8am in the morning and stay for a full day until 5pm in the afternoon. To prevent children from being exhausted after a long day and so that they will have energy in the night to spend some time with their parents, Chinese kindergartens have a long-lasting tradition of noon sleep for about 1-1.5 hours. This then leads to a specific daily task that practitioners will do - combing girls' hair when they get up. Due to stereotypical views and men practitioners' self-reported lack of experiences (see *Chapter 7, Section 7.4.1*), it is always the women practitioners who comb girls' hair. Occasionally, a few men practitioners in this research were observed to be combing girls' hair even though they could only do the simplest styles and particularly when the women practitioners got too busy. This shows a potential in Chinese kindergartens to challenge gender stereotypes, although men practitioners also reported that girls may refuse men practitioners to comb their hair because they think 'it looks ugly'.

Women practitioners are expected to take more responsibilities that relate to the care of children, as parents would worry that men practitioners are not caring enough. As a result of this and also due to the previously mentioned suspicion, men practitioners in Tianjin and Hong Kong kindergartens are always asked to work in upper- or middle- level classes with older children who are deemed to need less care. For example, in Xuxi *youeryuan*, Mr Han only works in upper-level classes every year, whereas a woman practitioner like Mrs Hua usually works with the same cohort of children from lower-level to upper-level. This, as explained by Mr Han and Mrs Hua, may have affected their relationships with the children to some extent, in regards to for example, that children would listen to Mrs Hua more than to Mr Han. I will explore this further in the coming section of 9.3.3 *Gender and Discipline*. Despite that men practitioners are hardly found working with younger children in Tianjin and Hong Kong for the sake of preventing them from too much of a caring job, they were still observed to be undertaking necessary caring when working in upper- or middle-level classes. They provided boys and girls with emotional support where necessary and as frequently as other women practitioners would, helped organize lunch and noon sleep, and paid

attention to each individual child's daily needs such as his/her health conditions, eating habits, and many more. Having chosen to work in this 'educaring' profession (Warin, 2014), the men practitioners have proved their capacity in caring roles.

Physical/heavy work is also a gendered responsibility that men practitioners usually take in Chinese kindergartens. I observed a few times when men practitioners in Tianjin and Hong Kong either were asked by women practitioners to help with moving desks and changing bottled water coolers, or actively took over physical/heavy jobs. These incidences match with both Chinese men practitioners' statements that they should help women practitioners in physical work as a man and women practitioners' appreciation of having men in the kindergartens for heavy jobs (see *Chapter 7, Section 7.4.1*). Acknowledging this gendered phenomenon, a manager in Hong Kong expressed her concern about the unfairness of men practitioners undertaking too much physical/heavy work and said she is seeking for possible solutions. Bearing in mind the greater involvement of care/grooming by female practitioners mentioned above, it is interesting that more involvement of physical work by men practitioners is more 'visible' to this manager as an unfair division of labour. Here I would also like to refer back to a statement by a Scottish practitioner, who said that it is best for practitioners, men and women, to support each other in such physical/heavy work and show the children the value of team support.

Lastly, the teaching of subjects/areas in Chinese kindergartens can also be gendered. In many Chinese classes, men practitioners were observed to lead activities around topics such as science, geography, and computer - all are regarded as men-oriented areas in Chinese culture. A majority of women practitioners expressed their reliance on men practitioners when it comes to those areas/topics. Correspondingly, women practitioners were more likely to lead activities such as dancing and music, which men practitioners usually think they are not good at. There were little or no separation observed in those more 'academic' subjects such as literacy and numbers though, suggesting that 'academicization' of ECEC (Carrington et al., 2007; Osgood, 2010) can override gender in defining men and women practitioners' responsibilities (albeit that

‘academicization’ itself is a rather hegemonic concept, see *Chapter 4, Section 4.2*).

In particular, physical activity is the most outstanding area that manifests strong genderedness in Chinese kindergartens. As stated in previous chapters, a key motivation to recruit men practitioners in Tianjin and Hong Kong kindergartens is the expectation that men practitioners will promote children’s physical health. This expectation is based upon the gender stereotype that men are better at physical sports than women. In the participant Tianjin kindergartens, men practitioners were observed to be the main organizers of physical activities, with most women practitioners assisting. Participant practitioners tended to think that men are more energetic in leading physical activities and would present the children with good role models in this regard. Even Ms Bao from Chenchen *youeryuan*, who graduated with a Master in sports and is recruited as a specialist in PE by her kindergarten, believed that men practitioners have their particular advantages in physical activities. As she said:

Ms Bao: The atmosphere is different when Mr Bai is doing [the physical movements]. It’s my feeling. It might sometimes be related to personality as well. Because I have done those activities, but maybe men teachers are more suitable. It’s just that men teachers are suitable for some things, and women teachers are suitable for others.

Researcher: Seems like you can feel it, but cannot describe it in a concrete way? Is it about the strength that men can show to the children?

Ms Bao: Nope...It’s just the overall feeling when Mr Bai leads the activities. Perhaps it is about the masculinity that men give out? I think it’s different - that men are masculine and women are soft. Yes, this is how I feel about it.

(Ms Bao, Female, Chenchen *youeryuan*, Tianjin)

Ms Bao’s statement might have subtly affected how physical activities were organized in her class, but my observation there showed that Ms Bao was always actively involved in physical play with the children. Mr Bai also denied that there exist any differences between Ms Bao and himself in terms of what Ms Bao described as ‘different atmosphere’. He appreciated Ms Bao’s high professional standards in physical education and thought he needs to learn from her. Nevertheless, Mr Bai believed that the atmosphere can be different if he is compared to other women practitioners who are not PE professionals. Considering that I have only observed Ms Bao and Mr Bai’s class in their kindergarten, I am not

in a position to find out how other women practitioners perform in leading physical activities. But the gender stereotype about men's advantage over women in physical education has proved to affect women practitioners' participation in physical activities with children, particularly when there are men practitioners present. Two kindergartens even recruited a specialised men practitioner to teach children (especially boys) martial arts. Despite being a 'care' practitioner whose main responsibilities do not include any organization of activities, Mr Tang from Kuaile *youeryuan* is responsible for organizing physical activities in his class being a man and having particular interests in physical sports. During my stay in Beiguan *youeryuan*, parents were invited to an open day in Mr Niu and Mrs Nie's class. Each practitioner was asked to lead a session under the observation of parents. Expectedly, Mr Niu organized a PE activity which was highly praised by parents and the head teacher.

Similarly in Hong Kong, Mr Fok as a specialist in physical education was required to teach all classes' PE in his kindergarten. He was also frequently invited to other kindergartens to train men and women practitioners about PE, including Mr Chin's kindergarten. His career experiences were widely reported by Hong Kong's social media as a popular man working in the early years sector and with outstanding contribution to children's physical health, suggesting the expectation and appreciation of men's believed strength in physical education. This strength therefore, provides him (and many other men) with a way in which he can be perceived as 'acceptable' working in ECEC (Nentwich et al., 2013; Tennhoff et al., 2015). The suggested differences by some participant practitioners that children are more excited and proactive when men practitioners are leading physical activities were observed to be evident in many kindergartens, too. The popularity of physical activities among children thus might disadvantage both women and those men who do not necessarily feel confident in physical sports.

The gendered expectations and stratifications of men and women practitioners were observed to be evident in various ways in Tianjin and Hong Kong kindergartens, reproducing gender stereotypes about men and women in Chinese society. Many kindergartens would even strategically recruit a man to teach PE, so as to make themselves attractive in the increasingly competitive ECEC market. By contrast, the transparent gender divide in practitioners' responsibilities were

not observed in participant Scottish settings. Usually the Scottish classrooms are divided into four or five area corners, such as the baking area, dining area, book corner, bathroom, art area, outdoor, and otherwise as arranged differently in different settings. The practitioners will take turns to look after the areas on weekly rotas, and in about a month's time each practitioner will have worked in all areas. No gender separation was found. For example, men practitioners were observed to be changing nappies in the bathrooms, or doing baking with the children. Even if some men practitioners indicated that they lack confidence in areas such as baking, they believed that their level of confidence will increase through experiences.

Whilst all practitioners in Scottish ECEC settings are supposed to share all responsibilities, the subtlety of some gendered distinctions as observed in this research is also noteworthy. For example, in Little Stars Nursery, Philip was more frequently observed to be playing with the children outside and Connie was often inside the room cleaning tables and tidying up. This matches with the (female) lead practitioner's reflection that she thinks female staff members take up more responsibilities in house keeping and related activities, whilst Philip is given more time to stay with the children. Connie also recognized that she is 'quicker in doing the setting up of lunch and stuff', therefore she does this more often than Philip. Although Philip was still observed to be doing house keeping once during my stay in Little Stars, this subtlety of gender divide seems to hold back efforts of challenging dominant conceptions of gender in Scottish culture. But gender is not the only factor that could affect allocation of job responsibilities in the workforce. In Section Five Nursery, there were several occasions when girls and boys had accidental injuries or became seriously emotional and were taken to Gavin for solutions by other staff members. Gavin explained that this is because of his position as Deputy Manager and his level of confidence and experiences in handling those situations.

9.3 Gendered styles in practitioner-child interactions?

Not only that practitioners' responsibilities are sometimes gendered, but also that gender contributes significantly to the dynamics of practitioner-child interactions in ECEC daily life. This coming section will explore whether or not gender is salient

in aspects of practitioner-child interactions including communications, rough and tumble play, discipline, and any other everyday incidences.

9.3.1 Gender and communications

One difference between men and women practitioners' interactions with children that was frequently mentioned by my participants from across cultures is that children are deemed to chat more with women practitioners about their out-of-school life, including their families, what they have done over the weekends, and so forth. However, the observations showed that such a difference was rarely evident. In all kindergartens/centres/nurseries, girls and boys would chat throughout the day with all/both of their practitioners (including myself) about things that either happened in their life or they are interested, making such conversations a vital part of their ECEC life. Both women and men practitioners were found to be actively involved in those chats, and children would talk about a broad range of topics with the practitioners. The believed gender differences that children are more chatty with women practitioners and that boys and girls would chat to men and women practitioners about different topics, as reported by some participant practitioners in this research (see *Chapter 8, Section 8.4*) and elsewhere (Xu & Waniganayake, 2017), are not supported by my observations. Considering that the majority of such reports were derived from self-reported reflections by practitioners, it is evocative that there is a gap between practitioners' gender stereotypical views and the dynamics of actual daily life in ECEC settings. This 'breach' between practitioners' gender subjectivities and performances, thus suggests the potential for subverting traditional gender discourses in ECEC and the necessity for practitioners to interact with children gender-sensitively (see *Chapter 10, Section 10.3* for further discussions).

9.3.2 Gender and rough and tumble play

Rough and tumble play is a second aspect of kindergarten life that was observed to be significant. My observations found that rough and tumble play is popular among both boys and girls in all kindergartens, whereas men and women practitioners' participation in the activity tended to be different. Mirroring some findings from the literature (Osgood, 2005; Peeters, 2007; Rentzou & Ziganitidou, 2009; Roberts-Holmes, 2009; Storli & Sandseter, 2017), it was noticed that when children were taken out to do free rough and tumble play, men practitioners

usually got involved in and even initiated the play. By contrast, many women practitioners were often standing by and watching the children play, adopting an onlooker-stage manager role that is reported to be most frequently adopted by ECEC practitioners in Turkey (Ivrendi, 2017). According to Tianjin and Hong Kong participants' explanations, men practitioners are regarded as physically capable and confident in rough and tumble play with the children; whilst women practitioners often feel concerned about safety issues. In Tianjin kindergartens, there were two men practitioners, Mr Niu and Mr Tang, who especially enjoyed playing with the children. They were even purposefully initiating some lifting and big movements, to satisfy the children and to maintain their popularity among the children (as interpreted by themselves or their female colleagues/principals). For instance, in Mr Niu's class, you could often observe a queue of girls and boys waiting to be lifted high and circled by Mr Niu in the playground. Similarly, children enjoyed watching Mr Tang performing risky behaviours such as climbing up onto the slide. In Hong Kong, children were observed to get excited when Mr Ngai played basketball and performed a few 'cool' gestures in front of them. There was also an incident when a girl asked to hang on my arms and enjoyed being circled. Through those experiences, rough and tumble play (especially risky play) becomes a popular way of interaction specifically between men practitioners and the children in Chinese kindergartens, making it an important strategy that some men practitioners value as their unique contributions to ECEC. By 'performing' masculinity through the physicality/'roughness', those men are able to make their participation in ECEC more 'acceptable' by parents and the wider societies (Nentwich et al., 2013; Tennhoff et al., 2015).

But some Chinese women practitioners were observed to be involved in rough and tumble play, too. Those women practitioners are usually in their 20s, and are more likely than other more experienced colleagues to chase after children, climb with children, and so on (they were rarely observed to do big movements though). One explanation to this difference could be age and the associated assumption that as age grows, physical energy decreases. However, with many Chinese participant classes in this research purposefully pairing up a young man practitioner with an older and more experienced woman practitioner, and in the meantime men practitioners in Tianjin and Hong Kong kindergartens are largely in their 20s or 30s, it is difficult to discern women practitioners' actual degree of participation

in rough and tumble play if age is to be considered. Indeed, partly due to the energetic demands ECEC has always been regarded as a 'young job' (Sumida, 2015) and many practitioners would leave their job or seek other opportunities that have fewer direct contacts with children when they think they are getting too old to work in the frontiers. Having received increasing endorsement in its benefits to children, play is becoming a significant pedagogical aspect of ECEC (Storli & Sandseter, 2017). However, the physical nature of some forms of rough and tumble play might also lead to prevention of practitioners'/teachers' long-term career retention in this field. When Chinese young men practitioners are taking advantage of their perceived strength in rough and tumble play, it also sows the seeds of high drop outs of men practitioners as men practitioners' age grows.

The intersection of age and gender in affecting practitioners' participation in rough and tumble play is also revealed in the Scottish settings. Not only that women practitioners were more often observed to be standing by and watching children play, but also that older men and women practitioners were more likely to step themselves away from involvement in rough and tumble play. Unlike their Chinese colleagues, however, Scottish practitioners' explanations to their degree of participation in rough and tumble appeared to go beyond their gender and age. Carl from Falm Early Years Centre maintained that he did not initiate those tough interactions himself, but it was often the children who came to him, climbing onto his back or initiating other risky interactions. This, as believed by all practitioners from the centre, was down to the children's ways of interactions at home with their fathers (see *Chapter 7, Section 7.4.3*). Jenny from Guild Early Years Centre attributed her reluctance to do rough and tumble to her sore back, worrying that she might hurt herself and/or even the children. Staff members from Little Stars Nursery further cited professional standards in terms of their interactions with the children. A female staff member (not the female participant practitioner) emphasized children's safety in outdoor play and pointed to the necessity for practitioners to ensure all children are playing safely (especially when there are many children outside). Connie mentioned about her role as an observer in both children's individual play and their interactions with each other. Even though Phillip did lots of lift-ups and other rough and tumble with the children, he told me that these should be done in a 'nice' and reasonable level for the good of

children - like not to overdo 'lift ups' to allow children more independence in play.

In sum, although practitioners' involvement in rough and tumble play with children can be relevant to a variety of factors including age, personality, confidence, professional values, and maybe more, it is recognized that gender plays a considerably obvious role in engaging more men practitioners than women practitioners. It is either that men practitioners are more confident in rough and tumble play due to their own childhood experiences or their awareness of gender stereotypes that relate to men's capacity in physical activities, and would therefore initiate more rough and tumble play with children; or that children are more likely to initiate rough and tumble play with men practitioners perhaps because of their gendered experiences with their fathers. Either way, the gender stereotypes that men engage more in rough and tumble play with children seem to be relationally reproduced through practitioner-child interactions in both Scottish (implicitly) and Chinese (explicitly) ECEC settings.

9.3.3 Gender and discipline

Discipline is also a common aspect of practitioner-child interactions in ECEC. In an ECEC classroom, there are always certain rules and principles that children need to follow. My observations in the different classrooms and cultures found that there are shared ways regarding how practitioners discipline, adopting a mixture of 'disciplinarian' (emphasizing explicit authority over children) and 'liberal' (allowing children's agency in making choices) approaches (Read, 2008) and including: oral command (to directly stop children from doing something [disciplinarian]), facial expressions and eye contacts [disciplinarian], separation (to separate misbehaving children from the group and allow them time to calm down/reflect [disciplinarian]), 'threatening' (for example, to 'threaten' the misbehaving children that they will be taken to a lower-level class if they perform badly - children would regard it as embarrassing if they are taken to stay with the younger brothers and sisters - a variation on what Read [2008] describes as 'pseudo-adultification' [liberal]), positive punishment (like to make the misbehaving child stand at the corner [disciplinarian]), and negative punishment (for example, misbehaving children will not be allowed to do their favourite activities, or to eat their favourite food [liberal]). Both men and women

practitioners were observed to adopt the same measures. However, differences were found in terms of who disciplined more in the classroom and who are better responded to by the children.

In Tianjin and Hong Kong kindergartens, there was a tendency that the more experienced women practitioners were those who disciplined more often. Children tended to listen to those women practitioners more than to the men practitioners, and would challenge the former less. When the women practitioners were present, children were less boisterous and more behaved than when only a man practitioner was with them. Many times during my stay in the kindergartens, I experienced a boisterous class with only the man practitioner, who either got used to the boisterousness or failed to calm the children down even with shouting. According to participants' explanations, such differences can be resulted from several reasons. First, experienced women practitioners usually liked to adopt a controlled style (a disciplinary approach, usually culturally linked with 'masculinity' [Read, 2008]) in making sure children are obedient to rules and principles (such as no chatting during meals or teaching sessions), whereas some less experienced (men) practitioners may be more tolerant with chaos and noises. Second, the women practitioners may have spent longer time with the children, and the children therefore know very well what are not acceptable through their long-term experiences with the women practitioners. But with the relative newcomers (usually a man practitioner), children like to challenge and 'test' their bottom lines. Third, 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). The women practitioners thus felt that they need to look after the class more than the men practitioners. With all those factors in play, a binary mode that includes a relatively 'tougher' woman practitioner and a 'softer' man practitioner is formed and established in many Chinese kindergartens, which is at odds with traditional Chinese expectations that men are the disciplinary parents in child rearing (Chan, 2011). It would be necessary to also observe Chinese classes that have only women practitioners, so as to explore these dynamics in a differently gendered setting. Some of my participant women practitioners who had experiences working with other women colleagues, thought that it can depend on personalities. My assumption is that experience would also play a role. Experience can transcend gender in defining

practitioners' roles in Chinese ECEC classrooms. At the same time, it also suggests that hegemony as gained from experience is relational and not confined to a particular gender.

But experience does not just contribute to hegemony. It can also facilitate a more liberal ECEC environment. In HKTA Tuen Wan Kindergarten where Ms Yau was responsible for leading the morning class and Mr Chin was assisting the morning class and leading the afternoon class on his own, I observed that the morning class were less controlled in comparison to the afternoon. Although Mr Chin agreed with my observation that Ms Yau was more effective in disciplining the children, she seemed to have done it in a more liberal way (Read, 2008). As explained by herself, she is always respectful to the children and would by all means explain to the children why some behaviours are not allowed. Instead, she thought that Mr Chin tended to just forbid children doing something, but not necessarily telling them the reasons (a disciplinary approach). As a result, children in Ms Yau's class can be more relaxed and those in Mr Chin's appeared to be quieter.

Apart from experience, some other factors were also found to be influencing on discipline in Chinese ECEC classrooms. In Tianjin kindergartens, the leading practitioners are usually the ones who discipline more often, regardless of their gender. To illustrate, in *Xiwang youeryuan* and *Kuaile youeryuan*, Mr Hu and Miss Tai were the ones who were more disciplinary. They were at similar ages to the assistant practitioners but were leading practitioners. In *Beiguan youeryuan*, although Mr Niu is much less experienced than Mrs Nie and was not a leading practitioner, he was found to be purposefully building up his authority in the classroom, emphasizing his 'masculinity' (Nentwich et al., 2013; Tennhoff et al., 2015). By contrast, Mrs Nie appeared to be the softer one as a result of her personality (as she explained it).

Institutional differences were also evident. Different classrooms may have different rules regarding level of noise, whether children can chat during lunch time, and so forth. Those differences were usually jointly agreed by the practitioners in the classrooms, and might also be related to the overall institutional culture. Discipline also seemed to be performative and situational. All practitioners were observed to be switching between different modes of

toughness and softness under various circumstances, even if many practitioners reported that they were reluctant to do so. For example, Mr Hu consistently pointed out that he does not like to be tough and disciplinary, but has to follow institutional regulations regarding children's good manners. There seemed to be a structural regime that all classes regulated children's misbehaviours, and many practitioners like Mr Hu just followed these regulations. Further, all Tianjin kindergartens were busy preparing for a big ceremony celebrating International Children's Day (1st June every year) during my visits. As a tradition, children from all classes will have to prepare one or more programmes and perform at the ceremony. Parents and the communities will come and watch the ceremony, therefore it is an important event for the kindergartens to demonstrate their achievements for the year. In such contexts, a lot of pressure could have been put on the practitioners who are expecting a good show. Preparing children at 3-6 years old for an organized show (usually group dancing) can be challenging, and therefore discipline was observed to be more frequent. An interesting example that I once came across was with Mr Hu, who laughed at himself when he was seriously blaming the children for being too boisterous during the rehearsal. Being regarded as a hegemonic way of interaction between teachers and children (Read, 2008), practitioners in this research were strategically performing discipline in dynamic ways that is not limited to merely gender.

Lastly, it was also noted that the numbers of children can make a difference to frequency of discipline. As Scottish settings have a lower child-staff ratio than Tianjin and Hong Kong kindergartens, discipline was also less evident there. Indeed, Tobin and others (2009) have noted from their studies in China, Japan and the United States that child/practitioner ratio significantly influences pedagogical values and practices in different cultures (i.e. the frequency of child-directed or practitioner-directed activities). I was also told that in Scotland, practitioners were not allowed to shout at children when censuring them. The age of the children might make a difference too, with children in most classes that I visited in early years centres aged 2-3 years old. So within Scotland the most frequent discipline was found in the two private nurseries where children's numbers are larger and children's ages are around 3-5. Bearing these in mind, the pictures of discipline in Scottish settings mirrored to a large extent, to what was like in Chinese kindergartens. For instance, the lead practitioner in Little Stars Nursery

was found to be disciplining much more than Philip and Connie, who are both practitioners. Alice (female) and Kyle (male) from Glastonbury Early Years Centre can be more effective and firm in censoring than other less experienced staff members in the classroom.

All in all, although discipline itself is a hegemonic, masculine behaviour that indulges the teachers/practitioners power over the children, there were few gender differences between men and women practitioners' disciplinary strategies. Experiences, roles, and structural cultures were factors that mostly affected the dynamics of disciplining in ECEC classrooms. More importantly, disciplining is situationally performed by all teachers/practitioners in the organization of the classrooms and activities.

9.3.4 Gender and 'informing/snitching'

Children are aware of practitioners' power and often make use of it through informing on their peers (reporting other children's misbehaviour to practitioners). Matching the frequency of discipline 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 Chinese kindergartens than in Scottish settings. This suggests that power is relational in practitioner-child interactions and children respond actively to it. In Scotland, snitching was only observed to be frequent in Little Stars Nursery, where discipline and censoring was also more pervasive if compared to other researched Scottish settings. I have explained earlier that this might be attributed to the large class size and the children's age. But the ways how practitioners respond to snitching were no different from across cultures, with similar strategies that they used for discipline. An example strategy was where practitioners usually tried to allow children opportunities to explain what happened (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 all three 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 more powerful (as described above, usually the more experienced ones and the lead

practitioners) may be preferred. Usually it seemed just an opportunistic choice depending on which practitioner was around.

Two Tianjin men practitioners, Mr Niu and Mr Hu who demonstrated their strong masculine subjectivities in the interviews, were observed to adopt gendered ways in response to snitching. A girl once 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 apologize formally, without even asking what has happened and also saying: “How could boys bully girls!” Mr Niu then also emphasized this to the whole class: “Boys, I kept saying this. Boys should NOT bully girls. Boys have to be gentlemen.” Reflecting his own ‘masculinised’ gender subjectivity (see *Chapter 7*), Mr Niu is intentionally teaching the boys proper ways of being a man. Similarly, Mr Hu also tried to teach his boys ways of being a man. When a boy snitches to him, he responded: “you are a boy and you are snitching, again?! I feel (shame for you)...”. Mr Hu’s response is consistent with his different treatment to boys and girls as he described, in that he wants his boys to be tougher and more resilient to social stresses when they grow up (see *Chapter 7, Section 7.4.3*).

9.3.5 Gender and physical contact

The fifth important aspect of practitioner-child interactions is physical contact. Cuddles, kisses, and other necessary physical touch are regarded as important in ECEC, for children’s emotional needs and as a catalyst for building trust in practitioner-child relationships (Campbell-Barr & Georgeson, 2015; Taggart, 2015). Although there seemed to be a pervasive discourse that places concerns and suspicions over men’s physical touch with children (especially girls) (Skelton, 2003; Sumsion, 2005; Rentzou & Ziganitidou, 2009; Peeters et al., 2015; Tennhoff, et al., 2015) in all cultures and as a result many men practitioners expressed their cautiousness towards physical contact with children (see for example, Xu, 2012; Brody, 2014 & 2015), it appeared in this research that physical touch with children are considered normal/necessary. In all kindergartens, hugs/cuddles, kisses and pats took place all the time. Children were also often found to be sitting on practitioners’ legs during activities or casual chats. Most of the time such physical contact was initiated by the children, when they were emotionally vulnerable (like when they bumped themselves, got sick, etc.) and/or simply as a way of expressing their intimacy to the practitioners. Both boys and girls were observed

to ask for those physical interactions equally frequently, and from both men and women practitioners. The gender stereotypes that girls are regarded as more emotionally expressive than boys (Xu, 2012; Wingrave, 2016) were contested in this research, and there was no gender differentiation in children's physical interactions with men and women practitioners. As some practitioners explained, it was all about trust and relationship that was gained through time.

The observed commonalities of physical contact among practitioners and children, however, fail to reflect the nuances of gender in such interactions as reported by participant practitioners. For instance, some female practitioners would think that they are more cuddling than men due to their self-perceived 'mothering' nature and are more comfortable initiating such physical contact with the children both because of their own wishes/inclinations and the perceived social acceptance. On the contrary, some men practitioners suggested that they were consciously distancing themselves from intimate touches with the children. Almost all men practitioners from Tianjin and Hong Kong said that they need to be careful about their physical contact with girls (interestingly, in Chinese culture physical contact with boys would not be deemed as suspicious), to protect themselves and to avoid accusations from parents. But some men practitioners also pointed out that the concerns are gradually reduced as they gain more trusts from the parents. Other practitioners, from Tianjin, Hong Kong, and Edinburgh, referred to the pedagogical needs of reducing intimate contacts with children to develop their independence. Two Scottish men practitioners, John and Philip, also cited pedagogical needs but to justify the necessity of those physical contacts. As John said, he understands 3-5 years olds who need hugs for their emotional needs, hence he should not withhold hugging the children. Philip agreed with John and said that he is prioritizing children's needs over concerns (about child protection). He further added that his contacts with children 'just happened naturally, because of love, trust, and comfort.'

One assumption on the reasons for the gaps between the observed commonalities and the practitioners' reported differences/limitations in practitioner-child physical interactions is that, such interactions are unavoidably initiated by children and are sometimes out of the practitioners' control. Many practitioners described children as 'naïve and innocent' (Walkerdine, 1989; Renold, 2005), who

do not differentiate practitioners' gender and like to be intimate to all practitioners. Further, even if some men practitioners tried hard to avoid intimate contacts with girls, they were still passively but frequently approached by girls. Mr Hu from Tianjin expressed his 'helplessness' as below:

I kept asking the girls to stop getting too close to me and told them that they should never be that intimate to a man other than their fathers. But they would only remember it for one minute and continue to hug me, kiss me...Their parents are fine though when they see this.

(Mr Hu, Male, Xiwang *youeryuan*, Tianjin)

Such gaps highlight that practitioner-child interactions are two-way relations that both children and practitioners get involved. The interactions may be affected by both practitioners' and children's gender subjectivities; at the same time, gender is also negotiated and reshaped through those interactions. With regards to physical contact, and citing Philip's quotes here, 'a nice level of physical contact with the children, respectable and sensible', are welcomed from all practitioners regardless of their gender and for the benefits of children's needs.

9.3.6 *Gender and close and caring relations in ECEC*

In addition to power relations, close and caring relations form another vital part of practitioner-child relationships in ECEC. Physical contact is part of the relations, but beyond these there was other observed subtlety of caring interactions between practitioners and children in their daily life. Such subtlety was largely based on the children's interactions with myself, and it is subject to future scrutiny concerning to what extent this can be applied to other participant practitioners. For instance, some practitioners in my research claimed that they feel that boys and girls are usually more inclined to interact with practitioners of their opposite gender. By contrast, it was also reported in *Chapter 8* that children's preferences to practitioners can be situational and changeable. My observation seemed to confirm the latter, as there was no clear pattern in terms of children being attracted to a practitioner of opposite gender. The believed popularity of men practitioners among children (especially in Chinese kindergartens) was also subtle. This, as some men practitioners in this research posited, might be because children got used to having a man in the kindergarten and the relationships will be far more dynamic than being merely affected by gender (children's novelty is relevant here, see *Chapter 10, Section 10.3* for

further discussions). This explanation can be partly supported by my experience - as a man myself, I tended to receive more attention and popularity from the children if compared to other female interns who were also new to the class. My experiences in the kindergartens, as a man practitioner (in children's eyes), also provided indications of other dynamics.

In general, I felt that I was welcomed by the majority of children in all settings that I visited, and there was little or no differentiation between boys and girls. In Scottish settings, there might be a few girls who were reluctant to approach me in the first place, possibly due to their previous experiences with men at home. But as I stayed in the classrooms for a while and the girls have seen me interacting with other children, they start to trust me and get close to me. This confirms the particular contribution that men practitioners would be able to provide children with a male role model (caring and safe) that may be different from those men that they have come across outside the ECEC settings in Edinburgh context. In Hong Kong and Tianjin kindergartens, I sensed a subtle difference that more girls than boys were curious about me. Meanwhile, there were also many boys who liked me and said 'I like you' to me a lot. The gender stereotypes that girls are more emotionally expressive than boys, again, were challenged by the boys' treatment to me. It might also be that children did not feel the power relations between me and them, so they would play with me more than with other practitioners in the classrooms.

9.3.7 Gender and pedagogical styles

In Tianjin and Hong Kong kindergartens, academic learning is a very important area. In Hong Kong, all kindergartens that I visited had literacy, numeracy, and language classes every day and children had to do writing exercises. In Tianjin, although the government is gradually forbidding academic study in kindergartens, kindergartens were still trying to prepare children for primary education. The 'academicization' (Laere et al., 2014; Peeters et al., 2015) in Chinese kindergartens, therefore transcends gender in practitioner-child interactions, as all practitioners were observed to follow the same curriculum framework and to adopt similar pedagogical styles. Indeed, most educational activities were discussed among all practitioners before delivery, and practitioners would follow a universal framework in each kindergarten. Even if each practitioner might have

different styles in the delivery, such differences were minimal and were not related to gender. A believed difference from literature (Li, 2015; Xu, 2016; Zhao, 2016) and from some participant practitioners' self-reflections that men can be more playful and are more comfortable with dramatic body gestures than women practitioners, was not evident. There were both men and women practitioners from all three cultures who can be dramatic in leading activities or reading stories to the children, as well as men and women practitioners who were less energetic in that sense. Another difference that men practitioners tend to provide children with straightforward commands and women practitioners usually spend more words explaining things, as reported by some participants in *Chapter 7*, was also subtly reflected. Whilst Mr Niu from Tianjin regarded his straightforward way of instructing the children as positive, Mrs Woo from Hong Kong deemed that this is actually an indication of a practitioner's lack of experience. Her pedagogical justification is that, children need to learn about why they are doing/cannot do certain things, so that they learn to make their own choices and avoid making the same mistakes. In sum, a diversity of different styles were observed within and across gender, and pedagogical values (such as independence, encouragement, respect, etc.) can transcend gender in deciding which are appropriate styles of interacting with children.

9.3.8 *Gender relationality*

Gender was sometimes found to be used as a category by children to relate their practitioners to their parents. Many times during my stay in the settings, I heard children saying words to me like 'my dad wears glasses like you', 'you are as tall as my dad'. A boy from Falm Early Years Centre in Edinburgh even called me 'Dad' a few times. This boy, according to the practitioners' feedback, was raised by his young father. He was also attached to Carl, the male practitioner in the centre. As Laura, the female practitioner joked: 'He used to love me but then turned to Carl after Carl arrived.' Another boy, from Guild Early Years Centre, liked playing with me and followed me everywhere throughout my stay in their centre. Before I left the centre, I happened to meet the boy's mother, who told me that the boy has two brothers at home and he plays a lot with his father. She added that it is therefore nice to have a man practitioner whom the boy can relate to. In Chinese kindergartens, I also heard children saying to me: 'you and Mr Ngai look very alike' or 'Mr Chin and Mr Daniel (the English teacher in the kindergarten) are brothers.'

A few boys and girls who were found to be particularly curious about me, were said to lack a father figure at home and/or have little contact with fathers. Although we were unable to find out how children actually interact with their fathers in this research, it is highly likely that children would interact with men practitioners in similar ways as they do with their fathers. Carl's assumption that the children would prefer to initiate rough and tumble play with him, is one possibility that could add credibility to children's gender-relational interactions with the practitioners. There is also evidence in *Chapter 8* that children often regard women practitioners as mother-like. Further studies that look into parent-child interactions as of relevance to gender, are necessary.

Similarly, it appeared that adult parents would also sometimes relate to practitioners of their same gender more - especially fathers who are culturally regarded as less competent in childcare. Due to limited access to parents and because it was still largely mothers (and grandparents in China) who came to drop off and pick up their children every day, it is difficult to discern any pattern regarding which practitioners parents usually go to more. My limited observations in all three cultures suggested that parents (mothers) would go to any practitioner for chat and enquiries. However, a particular case in Edinburgh indicated men practitioners' potential to provide fathers a relationally friendly environment to engage in childcare. In Crawley Early Years Centre, I noticed that a father came every day to pick up his boy and always talked to Raymond, the male practitioner in the classroom. Being a father of 3 children and with his wife currently in hospital, the father was believed by Raymond to be suffering a hard time; and Raymond thought that his 'male interactions' with the father was of help. Another extreme case, also happened in Edinburgh, was a mother who told her girl to dress up beautifully so that the man practitioner will say the girl is beautiful. On hearing this from the girl, all practitioners in the classroom felt uncomfortable and thought this could be even dangerous for the girl. This further suggests that parents sometime may regard practitioners in relation to their gender, and may have impacted on children's gender relations with practitioners/adults.

All in all, gender seems to be a category that children are aware of and also make use of relationally to either guide their interactions with different adults, or to compensate for missing figures in their life. So as adult practitioners and parents,

who might sometimes perform their interactions with children and others according to gender experiences.

9.4 Gender incidences in ECEC

Apart from those above patterns in terms of whether and how gender affects practitioner-child interactions, there were some other incidences, though far from forming a pattern, that are noteworthy. In both Scottish and Chinese kindergartens, I came across boys and girls who particularly like or dislike men practitioners, without having any ostensible or obvious reason. Gender in such cases becomes a category that neither lends to its traditional and cultural meanings, nor challenges those meanings. There were also many boys and girls, who were regarded as gender-flexible. One girl from Edinburgh was deemed to be 'boyish', and the practitioners thought this is because she always plays rough and tumble with her two brothers. Another boy liked to 'do' gender through constructions of 'traditional' or 'emphasized' femininity (Connell, 1987; Kelly, Pomerantz, & Currie, 2005) as described by the practitioners (i.e. dressing up in traditionally 'female ways' and liking 'pink stuff' and 'girly' dolls). His mother came to the practitioners for advice, and the practitioners thought that it would be good to give the boy both 'boy' and 'girl' toys to choose from - whatever makes him happy should be respected and allowed. Although the practitioners told me that some fathers may object to this (possibly due to their own childhood experiences or deeply held views about gendered 'appropriateness'), there is a culture in Scottish ECEC that children are treated as individuals regardless of their gender and whatever they are is their 'nature' that needs to be respected. In Tianjin, a boy was also believed to have different interests from other boys. He was usually found to be playing with the girls, and the practitioners assumed that this may be related to his experiences at home - that his mother wanted a girl and would often buy the boy 'girl' toys. Another boy likes to hug or kiss other boys (sometimes he would also kiss girls, but less frequently), and his practitioner thought this can be his way of expressing his emotions and may be related to having a little brother at home. I also sometimes observed other boys kissing or hugging each other. However, such situations were rarely discussed in Chinese kindergartens.

Once in a Tianjin kindergarten, a female practitioner from another classroom asked me what my research concerned. I told her that I was researching about male and female practitioners. She then replied, ‘we do not have male teachers [practitioners] here. It’s all females’. ‘How about Mr Niu?’ I asked. ‘It’s Sister Niu’, she replied. Although this female practitioner’s words were obviously a joke, it is indicative of a gender fluidity where men practitioners are sometimes regarded as ‘female’ by their female colleagues. On the one hand, the female practitioner’s words can be interpreted as female practitioners’ strategy to make the traditionally female workforce inclusive to men. As Mr Fok from Hong Kong reflected, his female colleagues would treat him as a ‘female’, and they would talk about all ‘women’s topics’ in front of him. By contrast, research has found that some men practitioners felt excluded working in ECEC, as most of their female colleagues would do ‘girls’s talk’ that they find difficult to be involved (Brody, 2014; Yang & McNair, 2017). On the other hand, such a strategy may be at odds with some men practitioners’ emphasis of aspects of hegemonic masculinity when working in ECEC (Nentwich et al., 2013). Either way, gender is sometimes used by practitioners as a fluid rather than fixed category of being in relation to the dominant discourses of gender as ‘fixed’ that were prevalent in the wider social community.

A discourse of gender fluidity was also observed to be articulated by children. Once a girl in Tianjin came to me and said to me: “You have a big tummy, you are having a baby.” I asked: “Do you think I can have baby?” “Yes, because your tummy is huge!” said the girl. “But I am a man.” “Male seahorses can have babies, so you are a seahorse, ha...”. I then asked her if Mr Hu can have baby or not. She replied: “No, he can’t. Because he is too thin.” Telling me later that she was just joking, the girl’s conversation with me matched with my previous findings in *Chapter 8* that children utilize gender as a fluid category to make fun. I later asked other children if there is a baby in my tummy, they laughed but said no. But a boy then lay on my tummy, pretending to ‘hear’ the baby’s sound. All seemed to enjoy the fun of breaking gendered structures. Similarly, when a Tianjin girl saw a boy hugging Mr Han in Xuxi *youeryuan*, she joked: “You two are getting married.” I asked her why and she replied: “Because they are hugging each other.” Two girls in HKTA Tuen Wan Kindergarten once joked to me that Mr Chin is a sister, and laughed loudly. Another Hong Kong girl liked to call me ‘grandma Xu’, as she

thought I looked like her grandmother. In Little Stars Nursery in Edinburgh, there was an incident during fieldwork when two boys were asked by a staff member to stop making noises. She used 'boys' to start her sentence, and one boy replied: "I'm not a boy, I'm a girl." (This boy likes 'girl' things and wears a kilt³³). The staff member then said: "OK, girls, you shouldn't be doing this."

There were also incidences in Chinese kindergartens where boys and girls articulated their strong admiration of their men practitioners. You might hear children shouting 'Mr Niu, you are cool!' when Mr Niu ran very fast in the playground or "Mr Niu, you are our idol' when children from other classes met Mr Niu in the corridor. Once in Kuaile *youeryuan*, a girl pointed out that Mr Tang cut bananas very fast. Another boy added: "Mr Tang is so smart. He is smart in playing football, and in cutting bananas." The singling out of men for praise seemed to be a feature in those Chinese kindergartens when men participate as adult practitioners. The influence of heteronormative patterns of admiration expressed by girls and women towards boys and men was also somewhat reflected. Girls in Yan Oi Church Kindergarten were observed to be really enjoying playing with Mr Cheung, which is consistent with the practitioners' reflections. On many occasions, girls came and said 'Mr Xu, you look very handsome' to me - demonstrating a kind of 'apprentice' heterosexuality (Hayes, 2000) as if they are trying on a role of being woman. During my stay in Chinese kindergartens, I have a feeling that many girls were extremely excited in interacting with me, if compared to their reactions to other female interns who stayed in the classrooms for the same length. The 'de-gendering' of practitioners was also simultaneously evident in children's eyes. The Tianjin girl that I mentioned earlier in this chapter who would not allow boys to touch her hair, allowed men practitioners (me) to touch, saying: "Boys cannot touch my hair, but you can." "I am also a boy." "You are a teacher, it doesn't matter."

Children also expressed their gendered expectations. Once I was playing with a girl in a Tianjin kindergarten and I pretended that I was pushed down by the girl. Another girl saw this and said: "How can a boy be pushed down by a girl?!" -

³³ Kilt is traditionally a 'masculine' piece of clothing in Scotland. The boy may have chosen to instead perform gender fluidity, due to its similarity to other forms of dress that in Western culture are deemed 'feminine'.

expecting that boys should be stronger than girls. A girl from Hong Kong told me that she preferred a little sister to a brother, because “boys are rough, and I don’t like it”. When I was sitting on a pink chair in a Hong Kong kindergarten, some boys pointed to me that “boys should not sit on pink chairs.” Although some other children may dispute this and maintained that “boys can like pink and sit on pink chairs”, such gendered expectations of colour seem to have been reproduced among children. When a girl was spitting bubbles and spit on the floor in Kuaile *youeryuan*, Miss Tai stopped her saying: “Be careful. You are a girl (and should not be doing this)”. Further, I once heard a female practitioner in Hong Kong teaching children to draw pictures of boys and girls. She pointed out that boys should have short hair and girls have long hair in the pictures - showing practitioners’ gendered expectations as well.

In a Hong Kong kindergarten, I observed once that when there was a shortage of seats in the classroom, Ms Yau asked a boy to give his seat to a girl, saying ‘you are a boy and you should give your seat to a girl’. A similar scenario happened in a Tianjin kindergarten, where a boy and a girl were observed to be fighting for the same seat. The boy insisted that he was sitting there in the morning, so he should continue to sit there. Mrs Nie therefore asked the girl to sit elsewhere, and the girl was unhappy. Mrs Nie then asked the boy, ‘do you like (the girl)?’ The boy said Yes. “Then can you be nice and let (the girl) sit there?” The boy nodded his head and Mrs Nie asked him to discuss with the girl themselves. The two children discussed for a while, without Mrs Nie’s intervention. The boy remained in the seat and the girl left. Mrs Nie then asked the girl why she left. She replied that the boy said he will let her sit there tomorrow morning. The two practitioners’ different interventions on a similar occasion suggest alternative ways of practitioner-child interactions. The former, although in a positive way, reproduces a gender division between boys and girls that is shaped by a ‘chivalrous’ discourse in popular culture (Attwood, 2018). The latter, instead, can help children to develop their communication skills.

A further scenario that took place in both Hong Kong and Edinburgh also suggests how gender can be approached differently in practitioners’ practices. As the below two female practitioners reflected:

We had a joke to say would that skirt fit Mr Hill? It's really fun because they say Mr Hill can. 'They could have a pink top...'. [...] And make up, no boys wear make-up, but Halloween. 'Well, yeah, he sometimes may.' It's just time to make them more open to different kind of things. I think a good way doing that it's actually dressing up. The dressing up corner. It's actually really funny because a lot of times when the dresses are around, the boys wear them. It's really nice [...] It's just exploring, it's just dressing up, it's like being superman or spider man.

(Amy, Female, Crewkerne Primary School Nursery Class, Edinburgh)

Sometimes children will draw pictures of their teachers. Usually I am wearing a skirt in their pictures. When Mr Chiu first came to work with them, he is also portrayed to be wearing a skirt. It might be because children get used to drawing a teacher with skirts. We will then correct the children, and they will realize Mr Chiu is a boy: 'Yeah, Mr Chiu is a boy [and should not be wearing a skirt].'

(Miss Tso, Female, Yau Oi Kindergarten, Hong Kong)

Again, what happened in Crewkerne might open up children's opportunities for explorations of different ways of gender embodiment, as compared to children from Yau Oi, who were 're-gendered' into heteronormative ways of being man and woman.

The textbooks used in kindergartens can also be gendered. Once in a Hong Kong kindergarten, children were learning about different occupations in English. The English teacher was talking about 'policeman', and a boy said 'policewoman'. Because there are only words like 'policeman', 'postman', and 'fireman' in the textbook, the teacher asked the children to mention 'man' only, because he wants to make the teaching easy. The need to review genderedness in kindergarten curriculum and materials (Vandenbroeck & Peeters, 2008), thus is also important in understanding the gender reproduction in ECEC.

9.5 Summary

To conclude this chapter, my observations in the 17 ECEC settings in Tianjin, Hong Kong, and Edinburgh showed that gender is unavoidably salient in the daily interactions of practitioners and children. Although there is a tendency that the Chinese kindergartens would employ gender in their daily organizations in more explicit ways and the Scottish settings tended to deemphasize gender, the subtlety of gender was found to be pervasive in all three cultures. Many

participant practitioners' articulated conceptions of gender revealed a tendency towards beliefs in essentialized, binary gender differences between men and women. Nevertheless, the observations demonstrated that gender is more of a fluid category used by both practitioners and children in their daily life to situate themselves and relate to their ECEC communities. The dynamics of gender performances in ECEC classrooms, are complicated and subject to a variety of discourses.

Chapter 10 Discussions: gender, culture, and quality ECEC

This chapter will draw on findings from the current study as well as from relevant literature, to analyse the complexities of gender and practitioner-child interactions in ECEC settings. A particular focus will be placed on Scottish and Chinese (both the Mainland Chinese culture as found in Tianjin and the Hong Kong culture) cultures' influences on manifested patterns in this study. The discussions will be further situated in a global context of advocating for quality ECEC, and will shed light on how gendered practitioner-child interactions may limit both children's and practitioners' opportunities.

10.1 The gender-diverse and -flexible practitioners

As discussed in *Chapter 4*, the 'feminisation' of ECEC (Laere et al., 2014) as a popular concern in many societies has led to increasing calls for men to work in ECEC (Peeters, 2007; Robert-Homles & Brownhill, 2011; Brownhill, 2015; Rohrmann & Emilsen, 2015; Peeters, et al., 2015; Warin, 2017; Yang & McNairb, 2017). Popular discourses that are used to justify men's participation in ECEC usually expect men to fulfil roles that are complementary to those of women's, including: to establish a gender-balanced workforce, to add to the diversity of ECEC pedagogy (assuming that men and women may teach differently), and particularly, to provide boys with male role models (Skelton, 2003; Francis, 2008; Francis et al., 2008; Brownhill, 2015; Rohrmann & Emilsen, 2015; Peeters et al., 2015; Warin, 2017). Those discourses are evidently reflected in two of my research contexts - Mainland China and Hong Kong (where salient, the two Chinese contexts are overall more similar and so will be treated together). To illustrate, Mainland Chinese academics and the public hope that men can teach boys to be men and can 're-gender' the 'missing masculinity' among boys (Cao & Wu, 2016); in both Mainland China and Hong Kong, men are also regarded as having strengths in physical education, which would benefit children's physical health and wellbeing. Such expectations, reflecting the global discourses described, fall into the problem of hegemonic gender essentialisation and gender binary in expecting all men to be the same and to be different from their opposite gender (women) (Blaise, 2005; Francis, 2012; Connell & Pearse, 2015; Warin, 2017). Specifically, however, there is also a different discourse revealed in Scotland that aims to demonstrate that men can be different within their gender. Scottish Government

and the early years sectors want the male practitioners to show children men can be caring, respectful and nice, different from those violent and tough men that children may come across in their early family life (see <http://www.meninchildcare.co.uk/>). The different discourses of having men working in ECEC, as found in different cultures, thus point to the rethinking of men's values to ECEC - whether men would challenge traditional gender structures, or would reinforce them.

By exploring participant practitioners' gender subjectivities, this research discerns that men could both reproduce traditional gender structures and challenge them. And so could women practitioners. On the one hand, many participant practitioners would construct their gender subjectivities in accordance with the wider social/gender discourses. For example, drawing on the discourses of 'male role models', Scottish men practitioners tended to regard themselves as positive male role models for children, constructing their gender subjectivities as caring and respectful men. Meanwhile, many Chinese men and women practitioners were inclined to emphasize stereotypical gender differences that are shaped by dominant gender discourses of essentialist/biological differences between men and women in China, when describing their contributions to ECEC - especially men practitioners, who frequently mentioned their presence in ECEC as complementary to women in terms of providing boys with male figures to emulate and adding 'male pedagogies' (such as risky, physical play, and so on) to ECEC. On the other hand, both Scottish and Chinese practitioners, men and women, revealed their various gender subjectivities within gender. There were Scottish men and women practitioners who believed that 'essential'/biological gender differences exist between men and women, as well as others who attended to the individualities of each single practitioner/child. Although essentialized gender differences remained undoubted among the majority of Chinese men and women practitioners, who also expressed that they would treat boys and girls differently, there was also emerging evidence that some Chinese men and women can be open-minded about gender fluidity and flexibility (Warin & Adriany, 2017; Warin, 2017). For example, Mr Chiu from Hong Kong reported that he could 'perform' 'feminine' characters in his job; Miss Tai from Tianjin recognized that girls and boys do not always manifest traditionally perceived 'female' or 'male' traits. The discursiveness of relating themselves to

dominant gender discourses, as demonstrated in many studies (Francis & Skelton, 2001; Francis, 2008; Brody, 2014 & 2015; Brownhill, 2014), was reflected among men and women participants in the current study.

Practitioners' gender subjectivities can be diverse and different from individual to individual, as the 34 participants in this research have shown. There may be men like Mr Hu and Mr Niu from Tianjin who emphasized their perceived strong 'masculine' traits when working with young children, as well as men like Mr Ngai from Hong Kong and John from Edinburgh who regarded themselves as less 'manly'. Gender subjectivities are also not necessarily confined to individuals' social gender identity and are rarely binary. Instead, individual practitioners discursively construct their gender subjectivities to reflect both cultural patterns and individual experiences. For instance, Carl thought he possesses 'female' characteristics such as being caring and Alice believed she is outgoing and open-minded like men - both as results of their upbringing environments surrounded mainly by women and men respectively. Many male and female practitioners in Edinburgh also tended to downplay the impact of gender on fulfilling their roles, frequently referring to the discourse of individuality and emphasizing individual personalities and experiences. I would therefore argue that the widely-endorsed agenda to promote gender diversity in ECEC (Rohrmann & Emilsen, 2015; Warin, 2017) does not rely merely on including men in the sector. It is more about how each individual practitioner's gender subjectivities can be different, regardless of their gender. That said, men are still to be welcomed to work in ECEC and to add gender diversity, considering the gendered patterns that both men and women practitioners may manifest as results of their own gendered experiences in a particular culture. Also, beyond that, promoting gender diversity in ECEC would need practitioners to openly confront discussions with children on topics around gender, which I will elaborate later in this chapter. Furthermore, ECEC practitioners are expected to perform their gender situationally, catering for children's needs and meeting the job responsibilities (Skelton, 2009 & 2012). This is what Warin (2017) advocated in her article as the gender-flexible practitioners, and was well reflected by some participants in my research. Performing gender flexibly implies that achieving gender diversity does not rely on expecting men and women to be essentially or culturally 'different'. Bearing in mind the gender diversity that each individual practitioner may manifest, the numbers of

men/women practitioners in ECEC actually matter less. If traditional gender structures are to be challenged in ECEC, it is those practitioners who are open-minded, non-gender-stereotypical, respectful of gender diversity and even gender flexible, that are preferred and welcomed (Skelton, 2009 & 2012; Warin & Adriany, 2017; Warin, 2017).

10.2 Children as active gender ‘performers’

Whilst the importance of practitioners’ gender subjectivities is recognized by academic literature (Skelton, 2009 & 2012; Warin & Adriany, 2017; Warin, 2017) and this current study in promoting gender diversity in ECEC, this research also discerns that children’s constructions of gender are enormously diverse and discursive. Mirroring the wider social structures of gender, children in this research have demonstrated that they picked up the gender binary thinking of men’s and women’s stereotypical differences from as early as 2-3 years old. In children’s eyes, women’s and men’s social roles are closely bonded with their gendered bodies (Renold, 2000). And such imprints of gender embodiment are significantly affected by children’s social experiences of gender in the wider social society, especially in their family life with parents (Cunningham, 2001; Sumsion, 2005). The different extent of gender stereotyping as reflected by Scottish and Chinese children, again, proves that dominant gender discourses in each culture largely shape individuals’ gender subjectivities starting from a very early stage. Where Chinese culture embeds gender structures that from a Scottish perspective may seem more ‘traditional’, children were more likely to reflect stereotypical gender subjectivities. Additionally, once children begin to socialize in a community environment of ECEC, it is highly possible that peer influence will place children in a position to maintain and ‘police’ gender norms (Ashley, 2003; Blaise, 2005). Browne’s (2004) findings that children’s gender-based interactions related little to parental or explicit peer group pressure, was not reflected in my research.

Simultaneously, children also demonstrated their emerging agency in resisting and subverting established gender structures (Blaise, 2005). In this research, both Scottish and Chinese children have revealed gender-flexible ideas (see *Chapter 8, Sections 8.2 & 8.3; Chapter 9, Section 9.4*) either about the roles and characteristics of adult practitioners, or in terms of their own interests. Although

in general believing in the binary differences between boys and girls as part of their gender subjectivities, some children suggested that such differences can be subverted; for example, through exercises girls can become as physically strong as boys. Gender essentialisation as a dominant discourse across cultures, seemed to be challenged by children in the light of attempting to cross gender boundaries and/or to flexibly utilize gender as a tool for fun (Thorne, 1993; MacNaughton, 2006; Estola, 2011). In various situations, children enjoyed both the ‘benefits’ of sticking to gender structures and the novelty of ‘breaking’ the gender norms, confirming what scholars suggest as ‘gender play’ among children that is situated at once within and beyond the constraints of gender discourses (Sauntson, 2012).

Most importantly, children’s ‘de-gendering’ (Martino & Rezai Rashti, 2012; Warin, 2017) of practitioners that emerged as a theme in this research (see *Chapter 8, Section 8.3; Chapter 9, Section 9.4*) pointed to the necessity of looking beyond practitioners’ gender to cater for children’s education and care. In children’s eyes, practitioners were regarded as significant educators, supporters, playmates and occasionally, disciplinarians. Practitioners’ gender appeared to matter less when children emphasized that they wanted the practitioners to teach them knowledge, to support them in activities and daily life, and to have fun with them in all kinds of play activities (Hutchings et al., 2008; Skelton et al., 2009). Although minimal genderedness was revealed in children’s preferences to practitioners of different gender for certain activities (such as men practitioners for sports and women practitioners for dancing), this research tended to attribute those preferences to the gendered ways in which practitioners organized those activities - rather than because children differ their practitioners by gender. For example, many Chinese practitioners believed that a ‘gender match’ is beneficial to children’s gender development, hence dividing the children by gender and allocating girls’ and boys’ groups to female and male practitioners separately when organizing group activities. Children will like all their practitioners based upon the relationships they have established through long-term interactions in their everyday life, and may ‘dislike’ a particular practitioner when he or she is deemed by the children to have failed to meet their needs. According to findings from this research, children’s reactions to practitioners are by all means relational and interactional, dependent on variable factors including but not limited to gender.

10.3 Interacting gender-sensitively in ECEC classrooms?

The constructions of practitioners' and children's gender subjectivities both added dynamics and complexities to practitioner-child interactions as observed in this research (see *Chapter 9*). As I have already pointed out, there is a research gap in literature that fails to explore whether or not there are any gender differences in the ways men and women practitioners interact with children in ECEC. Many studies relied on practitioners' or other significant adults' (parents/centre managers) self-reflections to exemplify believed gender differences between men and women practitioners (for example, Rentzou, 2011; Ho & Lam, 2014; Yang & McNairb, 2017). The current research has captured that children and practitioners are both actively contributing to gender dynamics in ECEC, partly in accordance with their gendered subjectivities. It was not uncommon to observe that some practitioners would treat boys and girls in traditionally different ways, or would perform gender-stereotypically to maintain their gender identities as men or women (see *Chapter 9, Section 9.3*). This was especially true among many Chinese practitioners, matching their gender subjectivities that were by and large shaped by dominant gender discourses in that culture. At the same time, it was noted that children may be gendered in their interactions with practitioners, as was consistent with their already-established gender subjectivities. They may relate their men and women practitioners to fathers and mothers respectively, and interact in ways that mirror their gendered communications with parents. For example, in an Edinburgh case, some children would initiate rough and tumble play more with the men practitioners (probably due to their experiences at home). In Tianjin and Hong Kong, children would (at the beginning) be more curious about men practitioners possibly due to the scarcity of men in kindergartens and their novelty in contacts with men. Taking into account some men practitioners' reflections in this research, it was sometimes children who initiated gendered interactions with practitioners. For example, children in Carl's centre tended to initiate more rough and tumble play with him than with other female practitioners (see *Chapter 9, Section 9.3.2*), in addition to practitioners who are believed to interact differently with children (Peeters, 2007; Rentzou & Ziganitidou, 2009; Ho & Lam, 2014; Li, 2015; Xu, 2016; Zhao, 2016).

Recognizing children's roles in gendered practitioner-child interactions would shed new light into the debate of bringing men into ECEC, as previous studies tend to focus more on the values of men's participation from the practitioners' side. Children need to be regarded as active transformers in gender transformation (Warin, 2017) in ECEC. They have the potential to play beyond gender binaries and to make practitioners reflect about their (gendered) practices, as has been demonstrated in this research. Gender transformation in ECEC is also a mutually interactive process between children and practitioners. Both practitioners and children are expected to learn from each other about gender flexibility and sensitivity, and to support each other in resisting to and challenging widely entrenched gender structures.

Through observations it was found that gender is unavoidably (Andrew, 2016) and frequently used as a category by both children and practitioners to organize their daily activities or communications in all three cultures (although to various extent). And structural and cultural influences played a key part. Grouping children by gender, matching practitioners' gender with that of children, and allocating job responsibilities in accordance with traditional gender roles, are all pervasive traditions in Chinese ECEC settings and in Chinese collective cultures (Tobin et al., 2009). The structural traditions were passed from generations to generations, and new practitioners would just follow them. There also seemed to be 'blindness' (Warin, 2017) in terms of how gender was taken for granted to be used by Chinese practitioners to organize things. Additionally, in comparing the structures of Chinese and Scottish ECEC settings, I also noticed that class sizes, staff-child ratios, daily routines and pedagogical methods all have contributed to the more frequent use of gender as a category in classrooms organizations and activities in Tianjin, Hong Kong, and Edinburgh. To illustrate, the usually larger size of Chinese classrooms meant that children often needed to be organized into smaller groups and gender thus became a more frequently and easily used category than in Edinburgh. Where competition is not encouraged as a pedagogical value in Hong Kong ('Generally speaking, the younger the children[,] the less suitable it is for them to participate in competitions [...] [The Curriculum Development Council, 2006, p.48]), competitions between boys and girls were rarely observed - as opposed to in Tianjin kindergartens where practitioners always initiated competitions between boys and girls.

Culturally, the discourse of individuality in Scotland was reflected in ECEC settings as practitioners focusing on children as individuals and staff members sharing team responsibilities, unlike in China where gender was more explicitly used as a collective category. Another discourse of child protection was evidenced in all three cultures. Emerging increasingly in Chinese society, child protection concerns have distanced Chinese men practitioners from physical contact with children. Arguably, however, practitioner-child physical contact is deemed to be an important aspect of meeting children's emotional needs (Campbell-Barr & Georgeson, 2015; Taggart, 2015). Unlike what have been suggested in many earlier studies (Xu, 2012; Brody, 2014 & 2015), the Scottish participants involved in this study have demonstrated their intention to challenge the misconception about connections between gender and child protection issues; and both men and women practitioners were encouraged to have reasonable and necessary physical touches with children. It would be interesting to follow up if the Chinese culture would head towards a similar direction in the future or not.

Whilst there were cultural and structural differences in using gender as a category to organize ECEC in the three cultures, there was also shared gender subtlety (Warin, 2017) and discursiveness (Nentwich et al., 2013; Tennhoff et al., 2015) observed in ECEC settings across cultures. Gender was found to be affecting practitioner-child interactions in many aspects such as communications, rough and tumble play, discipline, 'informing/snitching', physical contact, and emotional relationships, in subconscious and intangible ways. For example, in most settings, both men and women practitioners were observed to be playing with the children in the outside, and meanwhile there appeared to be a pattern that men practitioners were more likely to be involved in rough and tumble play with children. Many Chinese practitioners reported that it is different when men and women practitioners are leading physical activities, but such differences were very hard to tell from my observations. During my stays in the settings, I sensed particular curiosity from some of the girls about me, which can be interpreted as a performance of heteronormativity that children have picked up as expected in adults according to research literature (Renold, 2000; 2003; & 2006; Holford et al., 2013; Huuki & Renold, 2016) and to some of my participants. However, there were equally some boys who may be particularly attached to me and there were

few differences among/between children's treatment of men and women practitioners in aspects such as seeking support and doing activities. Referring back to the findings in *Chapter 9*, there were incidences that can and cannot be attributed to gender.

Several factors can be used to explain the hard-to-deduce gender subtlety in ECEC classrooms. First, this research has found that many self-reported gender differences by practitioners concerning their interactions with children were not necessarily evident in my observations. Some men and women practitioners indicated that they found children would chat around more with women staff members about casual things in their life, whereas my observations supported that children engaged in casual talks with both men and women practitioners - and practitioners of both gender actively responded to those talks. Some men practitioners reported that they were very careful about physical contact with children, but in reality they were observed to have frequent (but reasonable) contacts with children (some were even initiated by the practitioner themselves). In combining observational findings with those participant practitioners' gender subjectivities, I noticed that there are considerable gaps between practitioners' actual 'performance' and the perceived gender differences. On the one hand, the gaps signpost to the chances that gender stereotypes that have shaped individuals' subjectivities can be challenged and diminished when gender awareness is raised among ECEC practitioners and gender differences are explicitly discussed; on the other hand, it is likely that practitioners (particularly men practitioners) would exaggerate the gender differences as part of their professional subjectivities, so that their unique contributions to ECEC confirm with wider social expectations. This, according to Nentwich et al. (2013), Tennhoff et al. (2015) and my other research (Xu & Waniganayake, 2017), was a strategy used by some men practitioners to maintain their advantages in the ECEC workforce.

Second, the intersection of gender with many social and individual factors (Zwier & Grant, 2014; Lutz et al., 2011) as was frequently discerned in this research could make it hard to simply attribute the dynamics and complexities in ECEC classrooms to gender. Practitioners' experiences, personalities, job positions, age, and so on, can all affect upon how practitioner-child interactions are manifested, as well as on how children would respond to an individual practitioner (Thorne, 1993; Blaise,

2005; Davis, 2008; Francis, et al., 2012; Connell & Pearce, 2015). In Chinese kindergartens, the more experienced women practitioners are more likely to be disciplinarians than the less experienced men practitioners, which does not reflect men's expected contributions to ECEC as the 'disciplining fathers' in China and elsewhere (Mills et al., 2004; Rentzou & Ziganitidou, 2009; Chan, 2011; Xu & Waniganayake, 2017). The leader practitioners usually take more responsibilities on censoring and disciplining in Chinese classrooms as well. In Edinburgh, many practitioners would attribute their similar disciplinary styles and level of firmness to age and experiences rather than gender. But when men practitioners are the leaders and/or more experienced (i.e. in Tianjin's Xiwang *youeryuan* and Edinburgh's Little Stars Nursery), it is likely that their engagement with discipline would be interpreted as a masculine characteristic. Additionally, men practitioners from Hong Kong also mentioned that they were regarded as a 'disciplinary figure' in their nursery and women practitioners often make use of this in behaving children. There were also many other similar examples in this research, such as the intersection of age and gender in outdoor activities and the intersection of personality, children's novelty, and gender in children's specific preferences to men practitioners.

Third, this research has consistently captured the importance of parental influences on children's gendered experiences and subjectivities, despite the fact that the research was not designed to investigate how children's experiences at the family home with parents are gendered. To illustrate, children were sometimes observed to relate their men and women practitioners to their fathers and mothers. It is thus assumed that some of their interactions with the practitioners can mirror their interactions with parents (i.e. some boys were found to be initiating rough and tumble play more with the man practitioner in Edinburgh's Falm Early Years Centre, which could be because they do this more with their fathers at home), - but whether and how these interactions can be linked to gender, is subject to future explorations. Last, the possible limitations of outsider observations within a limited time-period also need to be accounted for (Palaiologou, 2012). With life in ECEC classrooms being dynamic and complex processes and considering that some of the gender subtlety was captured through my own engagement with the children, it is highly probable that I would be unable to fully discern the subtlety and discursiveness.

Acknowledging that gender is unavoidably and subtly influencing the dynamics of practitioner-child interactions in ECEC, this research would argue that a popular call in ECEC for a gender-neutral profession (Peeters, 2013) is rhetorical and unnecessary. With both practitioners and children coming to the ECEC environment with their various gender experiences and subjectivities, gender is frequently used and subverted as a category by both groups to organize their daily interactions and to situate themselves. Likewise, other factors such as age, religion, experience and role positions are all possible categories that practitioners and children would use to situate and relate their interactions with one another (Thorne, 1993; Blaise, 2005; Francis et al., 2012). Even if gender is to be deemphasized, other categories would still be in play; and should all existing categories be abandoned, there would be new categories created. Instead of advocating for gender neutrality, I would propose a gender-sensitive approach to ECEC. A gender-sensitive approach would require awareness of gender as well as understandings of gender structures. There is evidence in this research that practitioners and children would ‘perform’ gender consciously and subconsciously, within and beyond dominant gender discourses. Moreover, the discursiveness of using gender as a category as varied from individual to individual, from institution to institution, and from culture to culture, intrigues reflections on gender diversity and how it could be achieved in ECEC. Therefore, it is important for practitioners (and others such as policy makers and parents) in ECEC to be aware of how gender works to influence on ECEC pedagogy and ultimately the quality of ECEC, especially when there are implications of inferiority or stereotyping and when it constrain opportunity or subjectivity.

10.4 Gender, pedagogy, and quality ECEC

Gender has been found to limit individuals’ life opportunities both from academic literature (Francis et al., 2008; Jacobson, 2011; Sauntson, 2012; Warin, 2014; Peeters et al., 2015; Tennhoff et al., 2015) and in the current research. In the context of ECEC, both practitioners’ and children’s chances for development can be prohibited and limited as a result of adhering to dominant gender discourses. For men practitioners, their participation in ECEC has long been confined by dominant gender discourses such as the gender stratification of men as breadwinners and women as carers, the appreciation of hegemonic masculinity,

and the suspicion towards child protection issues. In some cultures like China, it appears that it is mainly men who possess traditional ‘masculine’ characteristics that are welcomed in ECEC. For women practitioners, their career prospects and ambitions can be disadvantaged and discouraged by the ‘glass escalator’ in ECEC workforce (Williams, 1992; Coffey & Delamont, 2000; Sumsion, 2005) that endorses men in management roles and senior positions, considering that some women practitioners in this research were equally aspired to promotions as their male colleagues. For children (in the early years), gender might limit their opportunities to explore their potentials in all aspects of future life. Through comparing different practitioner practices in similar scenarios cross-culturally (for example, how practitioners in Hong Kong and Edinburgh responded differently to children’s explorations of gender images, how practitioners in Tianjin and Hong Kong intervened in conflicts between boys and girls - see *Chapters 8 & 9*), this research discerns that gender could limit children’s social and emotional development, constructions of diverse subjectivities, confidence and self-esteem, and perhaps more. The study also recognized that such limitations did not necessarily relate to practitioners’ gender, but can be attributed to pedagogical philosophies, experiences, and gender awareness and sensitivity. Therefore, there is a need to move on to focus on how gender is utilized by practitioners as a category in pedagogy, rather than merely on practitioners’ gender differences. Further, this research demonstrated that children were obviously influenced by the gender discourses prevalent in their ECEC settings, as can be seen in the ways in which they sometimes articulate hegemonic conceptions of gender and sexuality in their own interactions (see *Chapter 8*). It is beyond the scope of the study to be able to say what effects this would have, although other feminist scholars have linked the influence of such conceptualisations to issues of self-esteem, perceptions of ability in certain subjects, and others in children’s later life (Browne, 2004; Blaise, 2005; MacNaughton, 2006; Estola, 2011; Jacobson, 2011; Francis et al., 2012).

This research also suggests that children sometimes enjoyed taking advantage of traditional gender structures. For instance, they will initiate more rough and tumble play with men practitioners having experienced that men are more likely to be involved in such play. Children will also relate practitioners to their fathers and mothers, in respectively gendered ways. Whether and how practitioners

should respond to those children's gendered needs, are also significant issues in ECEC pedagogy. Whilst Blaise (2005) argues that contemporary ECEC pedagogy needs to move beyond meeting individual children's unique needs and to address issues of wider social justice and equity, this research shows that a combination of these two pedagogical values is reflected in terms of gender and ECEC pedagogy in Scotland. Whereas, only the former value was manifested in the two Chinese contexts. Scottish practitioners on the one hand wanted children's experiences in ECEC settings to mirror or compensate for their (gendered) experiences at the family home, emphasizing the value of meeting children's various needs; on the other hand, they seemed to support children explore alternative ways of constructing their gender subjectivities, outside dominant gender discourses. In Tianjin and Hong Kong, practitioners tended to focus predominantly on supporting children's development as defined in national policies (The Curriculum Development Council, 2006; Ministry of Education of the PRC, 2012) and as expected by parents and the public, including their gender development. For example, Chinese male practitioners largely emphasized their contributions to modelling boys 'masculine' ways of being men.

If situating those pedagogical values in the global discourse of appropriating child-centredness as key ECEC pedagogy (Campbell-Barr, 2017), which governmental ECEC frameworks in all three cultures have stressed (The Curriculum Development Council, 2006; The Scottish Government, 2008; Ministry of Education of the PRC, 2012), it is indicative from this research that child-centredness is interpreted differently by Scottish and Chinese practitioners (Schweisfurth, 2013; Georgeson et al., 2015). For Scottish practitioners, child-centredness is framed by the discourses of individuality and democracy, and children are viewed as unique individuals who also enjoy the democratic rights to be 'gender-flexible' (Georgeson et al., 2015). For Chinese practitioners, however, child-centredness is more of a normative discourse that perpetuates strong influences from developmental theories (Adriany & Warin, 2014; Georgeson et al., 2015). For instance, the *Guideline to the Learning and Development of Children Aged 3-6* was frequently cited by Tianjin practitioners when they articulated how they support children's needs. Chinese children's gender development as suggested in this research, thus has been attempted by practitioners to be normalised in accordance with dominant gender discourses.

Nevertheless, as this study also found that Chinese children are actively responding to dominant gender discourses and are sometimes challenging gender stereotypes, there appears to be a need for Chinese practitioners to shift their conceptualisations of child-centredness and to allow children more freedom and agency in constructing/exploring their gender subjectivities. More importantly, when children challenge gender stereotypes in their interactions with practitioners, it probably might influence practitioners' gender subjectivities and performances as well. Consequently, through practitioner-child interactions, ECEC manifests strong potential in transforming gender norms and challenging gender stereotypes. Therefore, this study also argues for Scottish and Chinese practitioners to understand child-centredness as interactional pedagogy (Schweisfurth, 2013) that focuses on both children's and practitioners' agency and mutual influences in promoting a gender-diversified ECEC environment. This will hopefully open up opportunities to and facilitate the reaching of full potentials among children and practitioners and ultimately, be beneficial to quality ECEC that is defined by Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 as inclusive and equitable for all (United Nations, 2015).

10.5 A cross-cultural approach to ECEC pedagogy

This research also signposts to the necessity and meaningfulness of cross-cultural reflexivity in ECEC pedagogy and practices (Alexander, 2000; Tobin et al., 2009; Phillips & Schweisfurth, 2014). There exist many taken-for-granted and unchallenged gender practices in all of the three researched cultures, such as the Chinese classrooms categorizing boys and girls by gender and the Scottish practitioners' uncertainties about whether their gender makes any differences to their practices. By cross-culturally comparing how practitioners and children interact with each other, this study offers potential critical opportunities for practitioners to reflect on their regular practices and therefore realize whether and how their gendered practices can limit children's opportunities. A cross-cultural approach to ECEC pedagogy means that local practices are considered and 'judged' in cross-cultural and comparative contexts, meanwhile taking into account both local and international policies and discourses. Informed by Phillips and Schweisfurth's (2014) framework for comparing, a cross-cultural approach to ECEC pedagogy based on findings from this research will: 1) Raise awareness of

how dominant gender discourses shape ECEC values and practices in local cultures; 2) Inform about gender-sensitive practices and the possible consequences, as alternative to gender-blind practices; 3) Encourage rethinking of pedagogical values and the implications for wider social justice and equity; and 4) Facilitate mutual understanding of cultural differences and similarities among nations and prepare children as global citizens. Some participant practitioners in this research have already expressed their appreciation of the chances to learn about different practices in other parts of the world, and a follow-up study to systematically find out how practitioners think about practices from other cultures would be beneficial to gender-reflexive and -sensitive practitioner training as proposed in this research (Tobin et al., 2009).

The cross-cultural approach used in this study also informs about the hegemony of a globalised gender structure that embeds a strong binary thinking of men's and women's essentialized differences. In addition to the high consistencies concerning how Mainland Chinese and Hong Kongese ECEC are gendered in terms of main participants' subjectivities and their daily practices, the shared subtlety and discursiveness of the influences of traditional and dominant gender discourses as observed in all three cultures is extremely noteworthy. As mentioned in *Chapter 6*, there is a global agenda in addressing gender equality and diversity and in appealing for women's empowerment (United Nations, 2015; UNDP, 2016). Local policies in Scotland, Hong Kong and Mainland China have all demonstrated their effort to achieve gender equity and/or diversity (WoC, 2015; Scottish Government, n.d. a&b; Women's Voices, 2017; XinHua, 2017). Nonetheless, despite years of effort worldwide and nationally, there is still much space for improvement. Gender binary and gender hegemony are still found in this research as pervasive in shaping Scottish and Chinese ECEC pedagogy. The implied disadvantages to non-hegemonic qualities that both men and women, boys and girls manifest in this research, alert to the ongoing and even stronger agenda to tackle with gender stereotyping and discrimination. Challenging hegemonic gender discourses globally would benefit from cross-cultural collaborations and joint efforts.

10.6 Summary

Bearing in mind the international political drives to ‘achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls’ and to ‘ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all’ as set by the United Nations in their post-2015 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 4 & 5 (United Nations, 2015), this research has inspired rethinking of men’s participation in ECEC as well as moving beyond practitioners’ gender to focus more on how gender is used as a category in ECEC practices influencing on quality ECEC. Cultural variations in terms of expectations on men’s and women’s contributions to ECEC lead to the questioning of whether hegemonic, binary and traditional gender structures should be challenged in ECEC settings. And should these structures be challenged, the risks that men’s participation in ECEC would reproduce dominant gender discourses require alerts and appropriate actions. Recognizing that practitioners (men and women) possess a diversity of gender subjectivities within and beyond their socially defined sex and gender, this research argues that practitioners’ performances in ECEC relate more to their gender subjectivities than to being men and women. As a consequence, it is important not to assume that all men/women would work in similar ways. For the purpose of providing children with a gender-diverse and -inclusive ECEC environment, it is expected that both men and women are preferred as gender-sensitive and -flexible practitioners.

At the same time, children’s own agency in responding to gendered social structures as noted in this research is also vitally significant. They may have brought their gendered experiences from family life to the kindergartens/centres/nurseries, and can actively reproduce and subvert existing gender discourses. Consequently, both practitioners and children were observed to contribute to the dynamics and complexities of their (gendered) interactions. Indeed, gender appeared to be used as a category by practitioners and children in situating and relating their interactions with each other, together with other categories such as age, role positions, experiences, and so forth. In such senses, gender performances and gendered expectations may limit children’s and practitioners’ opportunities for enriched experiences in ECEC settings. Therefore, this study advocates that to ensure quality ECEC that is inclusive, equitable and diverse for individual children (and practitioners) to achieve their full potential, three approaches should be endorsed, including the gender-sensitive approach,

the interactional approach, and the cross-cultural approach. A gender-sensitive approach supports open discussions among practitioners and children on how gender is affecting their practices and experiences, reflecting on possible changes that can be done to minimize gender limitations. An interactional approach focuses on how practitioner-child relationships are developed through their lived experiences, addressing not only individual children's needs but also taking into account practitioners' subjectivities and wider social expectations/discourses. Finally, a cross-cultural approach requires practitioners and ECEC as a whole, to reflect on their practices through comparisons with those of other cultures, so as to envisage possible individual, structural and cultural changes that would benefit a quality ECEC environment.

Chapter 11 Conclusion

To conclude this study, this chapter will firstly address the four research questions that this study has set out to answer. It will then discuss some limitations that this research has and suggest corresponding recommendations for potential future research directions. This chapter will finish by making theoretical and practical implications of the study.

11.1 How do practitioners posit themselves as women/men working with young children in ECEC?

In order to understand how practitioners posit themselves as women/men working with young children in the ECEC workforce, this research interviewed 17 men and 17 women practitioners who worked in ECEC settings in Edinburgh, Hong Kong and Tianjin. In the hour-long interviews, participant practitioners reflected on their motivations to select ECEC as a career, how they coped with social stigmas, their (gendered) experiences interacting with children, parents and other colleagues, and their future career plans. In particular, participants reflected about how gender may have influenced their understanding of workforce responsibilities, as well as their interactional and pedagogical styles with children. According to findings from this research as well as from academic literature reviewed in *Chapter 4*, participant practitioners tended to discursively draw upon a number of different discourses to situate their gender subjectivities, within their specific cultures and related to their individual social experiences.

11.1.1 The discourse of care

Many participant practitioners from all three cultures still regarded ECEC as a ‘caring’ profession that requires traditionally perceived feminine characteristics such as love, patience, and meticulousness. This possibly explains why ECEC remains a profession that attracts mostly women and fewer men in Scottish and Chinese societies. When some men did choose to work in ECEC, they tended to posit themselves as non-traditionally ‘masculine’ men and believed that they possess certain aspects of ‘femininity’ as results of their own ‘feminised’ upbringing environments. By contrast, some other men in this research would intentionally distance themselves from the discourse of care, emphasizing their believed ‘masculinity’ as complementary to ‘femininity’ and as beneficial to

children's holistic development. As such, participants from many (Chinese) settings reported an 'internal stratification' (Williams, 1989) regarding men and women practitioners' workforce responsibilities when working in the same occupation - that women practitioners sometimes took more responsibilities on tasks regarded as more 'caring' (such as working with younger children, setting up and cleaning tables, etc.) and men practitioners were expected to focus more on 'educational' activities such as play. Occasionally, a few men also differentiated themselves to their female colleagues by claiming that they are less emotional in their interactions with children. This again, showed some men's gender positioning outside the discourse of care when working in ECEC.

11.1.2 The discourse of biological gender differences

Usually linked to the discourse of care, the discourse of biological gender differences was used by many Chinese practitioners (and a few Scottish practitioners) to further justify men's and women's believed different contributions to ECEC. Their gender constructions as situated within this discourse suggest that they believe men and women practitioners work differently when for example, organizing outdoor activities and leading pedagogical studies in Chinese kindergartens. Male practitioners were deemed to be physically better at doing exercises, more capable of teaching subjects like technology and physics, but less suitable for areas such as dancing, music and arts than female practitioners.

11.1.3 The discourse of socially constructed gender differences

Beyond the perceived biological differences, many participants in this research also drew on socially constructed gender differences and expected men's and women's social roles to construct their own subjectivities and their gendered conceptions of others. A number of both men and women participants in this research felt that men are expected to be the main breadwinners in their societies (especially in Chinese societies), hence the lowly-paid ECEC jobs appear less attractive to men. It is arguably precisely because they are 'feminised' professions that they are so lowly paid (Osgood, 2005). Some Chinese men practitioners also said that this expectation of men might affect their future career plans regarding whether or not to remain in this field despite the 'glass escalator' effect (Williams, 1992), whereby men in ECEC are likely to rise to senior positions more quickly than their female colleagues. What is more, some practitioners in Hong Kong

analogised their gendered roles to those of mothers and fathers in traditional family structures. Male practitioners were thus expected by some participants to be a 'disciplinarian' like a father. In referring to the higher expectations of men in China, a few male practitioners from Tianjin and Hong Kong even talked about their gender subjectivities that boys and girls should be treated differently.

11.1.4 The discourses of 'male role models'

Specifically, the discourse of 'male role models' as part of the socially constructed gender differences was frequently mentioned by many men in this research to explain their contributions to ECEC. Male practitioners from Edinburgh thought that they showed the children men can be caring and nice, i.e. non-hegemonic discourses of masculinity, in contrast to other less caring or even violent behaviours by men that some children may experience in their life. Chinese male practitioners, however, interpreted the discourse of 'male role model' in a different way. They regarded themselves as being able to teach boys expected ways of being men and to model the children perceived hegemonic 'masculine' characteristics. It is clear from this research that the different discourses of 'male role models' have shaped men practitioners' gender subjectivities differently in Scottish and Chinese societies, whereby the former is constructed in terms of the performance of non-hegemonic masculinities and the latter in contrast in the performance of (hetero)normative, hegemonic masculinity.

11.1.5 The discourse of child protection

Another discourse that is related to socially constructed gender differences is the discourse of child protection. Manifested as public and media concerns over and suspicions of men being paedophiles when they choose to work in ECEC, this discourse has led to participants expressing their cautions about physical contact with children, as well as about changing nappies and taking children to the toilets.

11.1.6 The discourse of gender equality

In addition to emphasizing their differences, men and women practitioners in this research also sometimes cited gender equality as a global discourse that has impacted on their gender constructions. These practitioners believed that practitioners of both genders should share workforce responsibilities and treat

girls and boys equally. Nonetheless, this notion of gender equality still assumes a dual gender binary view of gender (Warin, 2017).

11.1.7 The discourse of professionalism

Further to that, many participants also expressed a seeming ‘deemphasizing’ of gender through other discourses, including the discourse of professionalism. They declared that their understanding of ECEC is shaped by national policies, that they hold professional qualifications, and that they follow shared pedagogical values. Professionalism was particularly evident when Chinese participants emphasized the ‘educational’ side of ECEC, as opposed to the ‘caring’ side.

11.1.8 The discourse of individuality

Another discourse that supports participants’ ‘de-gendering’ of their own views regarding the construction of gender is individuality. This discourse was frequently drawn upon by Scottish practitioners in this research, maintaining that all practitioners may embrace different personalities, styles and experiences. Correspondingly, Scottish practitioners in this study pointed out that they should also treat children individually and respond to individual children’s various needs. Although less frequently discussed, some Chinese practitioners in Tianjin and Hong Kong touched upon the focus on children’s individual needs, too. Arguably, however, this discourse of individuality could perhaps sometimes be used as an attempt to argue that gender discrimination does not exist (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002).

11.1.9 The discourse of gender diversity

Lastly, there was emerging evidence from this research that some participant practitioners’ (mostly from Edinburgh) conceptions of gender have been influenced by the discourse of gender diversity. They agreed that children should be allowed to be ‘themselves’, if this means crossing traditional gender boundaries for the children; they also demonstrated their intentions to challenge gender stereotypes about being men and women, exposing to the children different ways of being an individual.

Above all, this research has found out that practitioners’ gender subjectivities and conceptions of gender more broadly are discursively shaped by the various

discourses described here. Practitioners were also sometimes found to subvert/challenge those discourses. Despite patterns of similarity in terms of how men and women practitioners construct their gender subjectivities (within and across the three cultures), this research also discerned a large degree of variation concerning how each individual participant (male or female) situates their gender subjectivities in and beyond the various discourses.

11.2 How do children view their practitioners' gender in relation to their daily interactions?

The second research question asked in this study sought to explore children's views of gender and their ECEC experiences, with a particular focus on their perspectives of the practitioners' gender. I used three pictures to facilitate conversations with 280 children in Edinburgh, Hong Kong and Tianjin; and extensive findings were discussed with reference to children's own gender subjectivities. According to those findings, children were found to actively construct their gender subjectivities, in compliance with, and sometimes subverting, dominant cultural discourses concerning gender. In children's eyes, practitioners' gender could sometimes be significant when children used gender to relate their practitioners to their gendered experiences outside the ECEC environments. Nonetheless, most of the time children tended to treat their practitioners in dynamic ways corresponding to their both short-term and long-term, fluid and stable, and interactive relationships.

11.2.1 Relating practitioners to gendered experiences outside ECEC

In exploring children's gender subjectivities, this study found from children's answers/comments that children related gendered experiences at the family home and in the wider social communities to their understandings of gender within and beyond ECEC settings. Therefore, their gender subjectivities as reflected in this research are considerably shaped by the wider gender discourses in Scottish and Chinese cultures. For example, the discourses of women as primary carers and men as breadwinners were sometimes adopted by children when they talked about who is holding a baby in picture 1. Children also described men's and women's bodily outlooks in accordance with 'traditional' discursive constructions of masculinity and femininity. As a consequence, children seemed to bring their gendered experiences to their ECEC life, and may sometimes relate to men and

women practitioners in similar ways as to other significant male and female adults that they came across in their life. For example, some children would think that male practitioners can play football and female practitioners cannot, because they have experienced playing football with their fathers rather than mothers.

11.2.2 Practitioners as the ‘same’

Having said that, this research discerns that practitioners were by and large regarded as ‘teachers’ by children, regardless of their gender. From the children’s perspectives, practitioners are all teaching them knowledge, organizing activities for them, supporting them, and playing with them. Gender seemed to matter less to children than their practitioners’ actual roles as they experience these in day-to-day interactions.

11.2.3 Building up relationships with the practitioners

Importantly, it appears from this study that children care more about the relationships that they have built up with their practitioners. In the long term, children usually have expressed their love and trust towards their practitioners. Children also seemed to have identified their practitioners’ personal styles and patterns of interactions with them, and would respond to different practitioners accordingly. In the short term, children said that they based their relationships with the practitioners on a variety of factors, and in fluid ways. To illustrate, some children may temporarily ‘dislike’ a practitioner if that practitioner behaved him/her, or failed to meet their needs.

11.3 What is the nature of interactions between practitioners and children in ECEC settings? How far and to what extent can these interactions be seen to be gendered, and in what ways?

In addition to explorations of practitioners’ and children’s gender subjectivities, this research also observed daily practitioner-child interactions in those settings where participant practitioners and children were based. The observations suggest that practitioner-child interactions in ECEC settings are more than dynamic processes, and gender is among the many factors that could affect such dynamics. Both practitioners’ and children’s gender subjectivities are found to contribute to the dynamics of their interactions, too; in aspects ranging from communications,

rough and tumble play, discipline, ‘informing/snitching’, physical contract, intimacy, and pedagogy.

11.3.1 ‘Performing’ gender subjectivities

Largely, findings from the observations confirmed that practitioner-child interactions as revealed in this research are in alliance with practitioners’ and children’s self-reported gender subjectivities. For instance, the gendered stratifications in men and women practitioners’ respective workforce responsibilities in Chinese kindergartens matched with their gendered views as shaped by the discourses of care, biological and socially constructed gender differences, and child protection. Where participant practitioners from Edinburgh emphasized the discourses of gender equality and individuality, job responsibilities were observed to be allocated mainly on shared rota bases and sometimes in response to individual practitioners’ strengths. Further, some male practitioners and children were observed to be initiating/involved in rough and tumble play between each other, more than between children and female practitioners. For the male practitioners, this was significantly influenced by their gender constructions that are related to the discourse of ‘male role models’ - either that male practitioners are expected to model boys’ (and girls’) perceptions of traditional masculine characteristics of being brave and boisterous in China, or that male practitioners should provide children with parallel (gendered) experiences to what children have experienced at the family home. For the children, they might initiate rough and tumble play more with men practitioners possibly because they have experienced such activities with their fathers. Indeed, children’s responses to practitioners as observed in this research were found to be as dynamic and fluid as they themselves reported (see *Section 11.2*), and can sometimes be gendered or less gendered.

11.3.2 Gaps between gender subjectivities and ‘performances’

At the same time, there were also gaps observed in this research between practitioners’ gender subjectivities (and wider conceptions of gender) and observed ‘performances’. For example, many practitioners reported that men practitioners are less likely to be involved in casual chat with children than women practitioners, but the findings showed that both men and women practitioners were frequently observed to be chatting around with children. Many Chinese

practitioners indicated that they should be careful about physical contact with children, but in practice some contacts were observed to be necessary and unavoidable. What is more, notwithstanding that some men practitioners mentioned about social expectations of men being disciplinarians, as a matter of fact, women practitioners (usually more experienced than their male colleagues) were actually found to be the main disciplinarians in many Chinese kindergartens I visited.

11.3.3 Gender subtlety in practitioner-child interactions

There are also interactions observed in this study that appeared to be subtly gendered. To illustrate, there seemed to a possible heteronormative subtlety in terms of children's preferences to practitioners of their opposite gender. However, it was insufficient to conclude this from my experiences and observations in this research. It is also hard to deduce the subtle differences between men and women practitioners' pedagogical and organisational styles in their teaching and learning activities with children. However, there are reported differences believed by some participant practitioners themselves in both this current research and in literature (Li, 2015; Xu, 2016; Zhao, 2016; Yang & McNairb, 2017).

11.3.4 Gender as a category in practitioner-child interactions

Overall, this research finds that gender is used as a category by both practitioners and children in their daily interactions, together with many other categories. Practitioners may sometimes employ gender to organize classroom activities or management, dividing children into groups of girls and boys. Children may sometimes relate to their practitioners using gender as a differentiation, to mirror their other gendered experiences outside the ECEC settings. Practitioner-child interactions in ECEC settings can be gendered in discursive and dynamics ways, and are framed within and beyond existing gender discourses.

11.4 How far and to what extent can culturally-specific gender discourses be seen to have an impact on practitioner-child interactions in Scotland, Hong Kong and Mainland China, and in what ways?

In pulling together findings from practitioners' and children's gender subjectivities, as well as from observations, this research is able to present relatively comprehensive pictures of how gender may influence practitioner-child

interactions in ECEC settings in Scotland, Hong Kong and Mainland China. Through the complementary findings that this research informs, it provides in-depth understandings of the wider cultural impacts on life within ECEC environments. Such impacts also become especially salient in this research thanks to comparisons among three different and similar cultures. It can be concluded from this research that, there are both shared and distinctive gender discourses that affect practitioner-child interactions in Scotland, Hong Kong, and Mainland China.

When summarizing findings of practitioners' gender subjectivities earlier in this chapter, I discussed nine gender discourses that have shaped practitioners' gender subjectivities discursively. Those discourses are also found to have shaped children's gender subjectivities to various extent, and to inform about how practitioners and children interact in their daily life. They include the discourses of:

1. Care;
2. Biological gender differences;
3. Socially constructed differences;
4. 'Male role model';
5. Child protection;
6. Gender equality;
7. Individuality;
8. Professionalism;
9. Diversity.

Although I have elucidated in this chapter that those discourses all discursively impact on the gender dynamics of practitioner-child interactions in the three cultures, there are also suggested cultural patterns in terms of how the three different cultures both reflect and perpetuate those discourses.

For example, the discourses of care, gender equality and professionalism tend to be strong discourses shared among all cultures. There are concerns across those cultures that ECEC is closely bonded with a 'nature' of care, and is thus devalued and understood as less attractive to men. In recognition of this discourse, almost all participant practitioners in this research cited the discourses of gender equality and professionalism to emphasize that ECEC should be conceptualised as a job

that both women and men could/should do, and should be understood as a profession that requires decent training and qualification.

The discourses of socially constructed differences (including ‘male role model’) and child protection are also prevalent in Scottish, Hong Kong and Mainland Chinese cultures, but in different ways and/or to a varying extent. Socially constructed gender roles of men as breadwinners and women as primary carers, for instance, were reported to affect Chinese participants (in Hong Kong and in Mainland China) more considerably than their Scottish colleagues. The discourse of child protection has resulted in Chinese men practitioners in Hong Kong and Tianjin to avoid taking girls to the toilet or initiating intimate physical contact with children. Nevertheless, Scottish settings started to encourage male practitioners to change children’s nappies and supported practitioners to provide necessary emotional support through hugs, pats, etc. - endeavouring to minimise the suspicions towards male practitioners. Finally, a ‘male role model’ as understood in the Scottish context tends to be a male practitioner who shows children men can be nice and caring, different from traditional hegemonic constructions of masculinity, including potential links of masculinity with lack of care or even violence. By contrast, a Mainland Chinese ‘male role model’ is expected to be a male practitioner who can socialise boys into hegemonic ‘masculine’ ways of being men. Nonetheless, the discourse of ‘male role model’ was rarely mentioned by Hong Kong participants.

The rest of the nine discourses tend to be more specific to either the Chinese or Scottish culture. Perceived gender biological differences were often cited by practitioners and children in Hong Kong and Tianjin to justify men’s privilege in sports activities, as well as to maintain women’s participation in caring responsibilities. Scottish practitioners, on the contrary, attributed differences between themselves and between children to personalities and individualities. Gender diversity also seems to be a discourse exclusive to Scottish ECEC settings, where children were occasionally observed to manifest gender performances that do not necessarily align with normative/hegemonic gender discourses. Those varieties, as I have argued in *Chapter 10, Section 10.4*, seem to have shaped Scottish and Chinese ECEC pedagogy in different ways. Whereby Scottish children appear to enjoy democratic rights of exploring various gender subjectivities,

Chinese children are usually constrained to heteronormative ways of gender constructions.

11.5 Limitations and future research directions

Having addressed all research questions, I would like to point out several limitations that this research has, as well as to make some recommendations accordingly. First, this research was not able to capture any significant socio-economic differences in terms of how children from different social class backgrounds view gender and how social class intersects with gender in influencing practitioner-child interactions. Having included settings from both socio-economically advantaged and less advantaged areas in all three cities, I did not see any significant differences in terms of how dominant gender discourses shape practitioners' and children's gender subjectivities and performances between those areas. The various discourses that participants drew upon, seem to reflect minimum relations to social classes and sometimes even override classed impacts. For instance, Gavin (a deputy manager) from Edinburgh was reported to do toilet cleaning and unblocking in his nursery, citing his perceived 'masculinity' as shaping the allocations of responsibilities. Whereby in Scottish society toilet cleaning and unblocking are treated as working-class jobs. It is possible that social class differences are minimum (at least in this current study). Nevertheless, as this research was conducted in large cities where most male practitioners can be found, it remains critical that whether socio-economic differences intersect with gender in shaping the discourses in ECEC. It is also possible that the social class of the practitioners do not match the social class of the locality in which the settings are based (i.e. some Scottish practitioners could potentially be more middle-class across the settings; Mainland Chinese practitioners are more regarded as working-class [Yang & McNairb, 2017]). Future research can be conducted to compare gender cultures in ECEC settings in both urban and rural areas, and perhaps to focus on comparing socio-economic position of practitioners, so as to address this limitation.

In addition, this research did not include parents' perspectives as a key stakeholder group in ECEC. This is due to the constraints of time and the difficulties in gaining access to parents. As this research has deduced that children's gendered subjectivities may be influenced by their significant adults,

it is worthwhile to investigate on parents' gender subjectivities and how these can impact on parenting and children's gender constructions.

11.6 Theoretical implications

Drawing on findings from this research, several theoretical implications can be made in understanding the concepts of gender and practitioner-child interactions in ECEC.

11.6.1 *'Educare': integrating education and care in ECEC*

Firstly, there is a need to take a holistic approach to understand ECEC provisions. As shown in this research, Scottish ECEC has a clear focus on providing children with comprehensive services to support their physical, social, cognitive and emotional needs. Including men's participation in Scottish ECEC settings thus is to make sure such services can include a diversity of representation. Although the 'educational' provisions in ECEC are still pervasively valued in Tianjin and Hong Kong kindergartens, there is emerging evidence from this research that significance is increasingly attached to provisions that are traditionally regarded as 'caring'. For instance, one of the purposes to include more men in Tianjin and Hong Kong kindergartens is to encourage children's increased participation in physical exercises and sports, in order to improve children's physical health. Considering the growing endorsements of children's needs in both 'educational' and 'caring' aspects and whilst recognizing that ECEC as a whole is still significantly devalued by the discourse of care, it would be beneficial to reconceptualise dominant understandings of care. Separation between education and care needs to be challenged, and education and care should be integrated into 'educare' (Warin, 2014) for the sake of representing holistic ECEC provisions. In so doing, it is hoped that ECEC will become a less gendered profession and will attract suitable candidates to fulfil children's comprehensive needs, regardless of their gender.

11.6.2 *Challenging (gender) binary thinking*

Secondly, this research also wishes to challenge binary thinking in understanding gender and ECEC. On the one hand, this research has found that individuals' gender subjectivities can be diverse and can go beyond being men and women/boys and girls. The binary categorisation of individuals as falling into two

opposed groups of men and women and as embodying dualistic characteristics of ‘masculinity’ and ‘femininity’, can limit individuals’ life opportunities and potentials. It also will exclude and marginalise those who do not necessarily fit into the binaries - like those children who may ‘cross’ gender boundaries, and those men who work in a traditionally ‘female’ occupation. On the other hand, this research shows that children not only perform gender in ways that reproduce normative/hegemonic discourse of masculinity and femininity, and the binary distinctiveness of gender, but also on occasion subvert or challenge it. The binary distinction between children and adults needs to be reconsidered in a way that takes into account children’s agency and active participation in social processes. As such, ECEC pedagogical values should focus on an interactive approach to inform ECEC activities.

11.6.3 Understanding gender and ECEC intersectionally

Last but not least, this research also discerns that gender should not be considered on its own when looking into its impacts on practitioner-child interactions and on ECEC. Findings from this study reveal that other categories such as age and experience intersect with gender in shaping individuals’ subjectivities and in complicating practitioner-child interactions. For example, despite the gender stereotype that men practitioners tend to involve more in rough and tumble play with children than women, it is noted that age seems to affect both men and women practitioners’ level of participation in such play; and whilst men are expected to take on disciplining roles in Chinese kindergartens, it was usually the more experienced women practitioners who became disciplinarians in their classes. Therefore, when considering how ECEC provisions can support children’s comprehensive needs and full potential, all factors including gender should be jointly taken into account, so that ECEC provisions will be inclusive, equal, and diverse to all children. Similarly, when understanding practitioners’ subjectivities and how they impact on provisions of ECEC services, gender is among the many elements that play a role intersectionally.

11.7 Practical implications

This research also has potential implications for ECEC pedagogies and practices across the three localities of the study, and potentially of relevance to other locations more broadly.

11.7.1 Gender-sensitive and -flexible pedagogy

Building on existing research in this field, this study demonstrates that gender is a major, seemingly unavoidable category, infusing practitioner-child interactions and potentially more widely affecting children's future life opportunities. It is therefore arguably imperative that ECEC pedagogies and practices are gender-sensitive (Warin, 2017). ECEC policies need to write gender into their framework. Curricula need to include elements that provide practitioners and children opportunities for open discussions on gender. And most importantly, practitioners need to be trained about gender-sensitive practices. They need to understand how gender works in their day-to-day interactions with children and how gendered interactions can limit children's (as well as their own) opportunities. They also need to share and learn about practices that promote gender diversity and equality in ECEC settings.

In addition to gender-sensitive pedagogy, it is also expected that ECEC pedagogies and practices should aim to be gender-flexible (Warin, 2017; Warin & Adriany, 2017). Practitioners are expected to 'perform' their gender in ways that disrupt heteronormative discourses of men modelling masculinities and women modelling femininities, and to showcase to the children alternative ways of 'doing' masculinity and femininity (Butler, 1990; Warin & Adriany, 2017). In addition, gender-flexible pedagogy needs to enable children to perform their gender in a childhood context of play, learning and fluidity, opening up opportunities for children to 'experiment' on gender-transgressive practices (Sumsion, 2005; Warin & Adriany, 2017).

11.7.2 Child-centred and interactional pedagogy

Gender-flexible pedagogy needs to be understood by practitioners in a global discourse of child-centredness (Schweissfurth, 2013; Adriany & Warin, 2014; Campbell-Barr, 2017). This research shows that children actively engage with dominant gender discourses and occasionally subvert them, thus having the potential as active and agentic gender transformers in ECEC (Blaise, 2005; Saunton, 2012; Warin, 2017). At the same time, children's gender-flexible explorations are supposedly reliant on a democratic ECEC environment that allows them sufficient freedom and agency in their daily activities and interactions (Georgeson et al.,

2015). Recognizing that many (Chinese) practitioners in this study appeared to interpret child-centredness in a normative way that constrains children's agency in gender transgression (Adriany & Warin, 2014), a shift in their conceptualisations of child-centredness is therefore proposed. In order for gender transformation to take place in ECEC (Warin, 2017), a child-centred pedagogy should emphasize both practitioners' and children's agency in critiquing/interrogating dominant gender discourses. Through their interactions with each other, both practitioners' and children's gender subjectivities could be negotiated against dominant gender discourses.

11.7.3 Cross-cultural pedagogy

Lastly, I would endorse a cross-cultural pedagogy in ECEC, considering pedagogical values and practices in a comparative context (Bray & Koo, 2004; Tobin et al., 2009; Philips & Schweisfurth, 2014). Practitioners need to become aware of cultural differences and similarities in relation to gender and ECEC, reflecting on their gendered, taken-for-granted practices and seeking alternative ways of addressing gender equality and diversity (Philips & Schweisfurth, 2014). A cross-cultural pedagogy also suggests exposing children to wider gender variations and diversity in other parts of the world, so as to open up children's understandings of themselves and the world surrounding them.

11.8 Summary

All in all, this study argues that practitioners' and children's constructions of gender subjectivities can be diverse and dynamic processes through which individuals embody and 'perform' their gender with references to a variety of cultural and gender discourses that situate them. To achieve gender equality, diversity and inclusion in ECEC, this study proposes that ECEC pedagogies and practices need to enable practitioners and children to interrogate dominant gender discourses and to become gender-sensitive and -flexible performers. Current political drives in the UK, China and elsewhere (Rohrmann & Emilsen, 2015; Warin, 2017; Xu & Waniganayake, 2017) to recruit more men to work in ECEC and to achieve a gender-balanced ECEC workforce need to reconsider their theoretical underpinnings and to make sure that such policies will not reinforce binary, hegemonic gender structures. A gender-diverse and -flexible approach to gender and ECEC is preferable for equitable and inclusive ECEC.

Appendix I

Observation Proforma Yuwei Xu

Date:

EC Setting:

Practitioner:

Class/Year group:

Number/Description of children: (rough gender/ethnicity proportions etc.)

Brief description of the general activities/subjects covered during the day (summary):

FOCUS OF OBSERVATION NOTES

Looking at practitioner-child interactions in:

- *Daily contexts
- *Specific events and activities
- *One-to-one and one-to-more conversations

Looking at issues around:

- *Instances of hegemonic/non-hegemonic gender behaviour
- *Instances of specific interactions between the practitioner and children
- *How practitioners respond to children's social, emotional, cognitive, and physical needs
- *Relevant aspects of classroom management/organisation practices, use of materials, and design of environments
- *Practitioner's and Children's embodied selves - 'fashion-consciousness', hair style/dye, accessories etc.
- *The context of the school itself and influence on behaviour

NOTES

[Observation notes to be written in detail here, with the researcher using the 'focus' bullet points in the box above as a prompt/aide memoire to keep the focus on aspects relevant to the research]

Appendix II

Interview Themes/Questions (with practitioners)

Phase 1:

1. I'd like to ask about some basic information of you, could you please tell me your age range/years working as an ECEC practitioner/education background/qualifications gained/description of your job responsibilities within this school/...?
2. Can you tell something about the groups of children that you teach (e.g. their ages, family backgrounds, and any information that you think may be useful for me to carry out the observations)?
3. What motivated you to choose a career as an ECEC practitioner?
4. How do you like working in ECEC?
5. In your opinion, what is the social status of working in ECEC in general?
6. And what is the social status of men working in ECEC?
7. In your opinion, why are there so few male practitioners working in ECEC today?
8. What else have you heard about having men working as ECEC practitioners in this country?
9. What do you think ECEC is for?
10. What do you think childhood is?
11. How do you think the child is being viewed in this culture?
12. What is it like working in this school? What do you find enjoyable/challenging?
13. How do you find your relationships/interactions with other colleagues?
14. What do you think your gender have brought into your role as an ECEC practitioner?
15. Do children and parents have different expectations of male ECEC practitioners compared to female ECEC practitioners?
16. To what extent do you believe, your relationships with children have been influenced by your gender or by virtue of being a male practitioner?
17. Do male practitioners work differently to female practitioners? Explain how and why?
18. Do you see yourself as ECEC practitioners in 10 years' time?

Phase 2:

- 2.1 *Informal talks during or after the observation (depending on situations), for practitioners to explain why they interact with the children in certain ways where applicable.*

19. You were doing/did + behaviour observed, could you please tell about why you did so?

20. Are there any particular incidents that you would like to talk about?

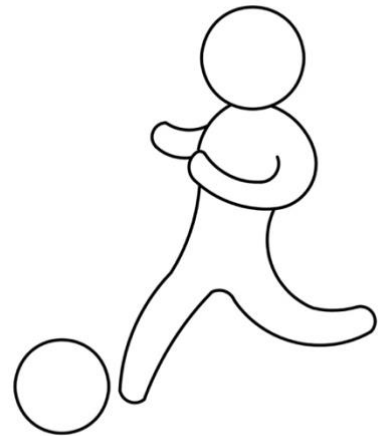
Phase 3:

- 3.1 *Interviews to review issues arising from the observations, using particular incidents as reference points.*

21. In general, how would you describe your interactions with the children?

22. What do you enjoy/find challenging through interactions with children? And why?

23. You mentioned in our first interview that ..., and I observed that you did ...; can you talk a little bit about this?

Appendix III**Pictures used to facilitate conversations with children****Picture 1:****Picture 2:****Picture 3:**

Appendix IV

Interview questions (with children)

Picture 1 :

1. What is the person doing in the picture?
2. Who do you think is holding a baby?
3. Why do you think it is ***?
4. If this is in your nursery/centre, who do you think may hold a baby? Is it *** or ***?
5. Why?
6. Have you ever seen *** holding a baby?

Picture 2 :

1. What is the person doing in the picture?
2. Who do you think is kicking a ball?
3. Why do you think it is *** kicking a ball?
4. If this is in your nursery/centre, who do you think may be kicking a ball?
5. Why?
6. Have you ever played balls with ***? Do you want to play with him/her? Do you like playing balls?

Picture 3 :

1. There is a teacher/practitioner in this picture reading stories to kids, who do you think it is?
2. Why do you think it is ***?
3. Have *** ever read stories to you?
4. Do you like *** reading stories?
5. What do you like to do with *** most?
6. What do you like to do with ***?

Appendix V

Pseudonyms list

Edinburgh:

Pseudonymous kindergarten name	Pseudonymous practitioners' names
Glastonbury Early Years Centre (ED1)	Kyle
	Alice
Crawley Early Years Centre (ED2)	Raymond
	Jackie
Little Stars Nursery (ED3)	Philip
	Connie
Guild Early Years Centre (ED4)	Sean
	Jenny
Falm Early Years Centre (ED5)	Carl
	Laura
Section Five Nursery (ED6)	Gavin
	Heather
Crewkerne Primary School Nursery Class (ED7)	Mr John Hill
	Mrs Amy Smith

Hong Kong:

Pseudonymous kindergarten name	Pseudonymous practitioners' names
Yan Oi Church Kindergarten (HK1)	Mr Cheung
	Mrs Woo
Hong Tak Nursery School (HK2)	Mr Ngai
	Ms Wah
Bapist Chi Sang School (HK3)	Mr Fok
	Ms Choi
HKTA Tuen Wan Kindergarten (HK4)	Mr Chin
	Ms Yau
Yau Oi Kindergarten (HK5)	Mr Chiu
	Miss Tso

Tianjin:

Pseudonymous kindergarten name	Pseudonymous practitioners' names
Chenchen <i>youeryuan</i> (TJ1)	Mr Bai
	Ms Bao
Xuxi <i>youeryuan</i> (TJ2)	Mr Han
	Mrs Hua
Kuaile <i>youeryuan</i> (TJ3)	Mr Tang
	Miss Tai
Xiwang <i>youeryuan</i> (TJ4)	Mr Hu
	Miss He
Beiguan <i>youeryuan</i> (TJ5)	Mr Niu
	Mrs Nie

Appendix VI

Examples of coded transcripts

Example 1: coded interview transcripts

R: And how about being a man specifically working in this job? How do people view about this.

I: Well again you've witnessed that as well this week, and that's been great cause that happened when you being here. She's actually specified she doesn't have a male figure change her daughter. Fine, you know. They've got that choice. It's actually before, one thing that I should do. I don't think about it. I'm hoping that if one gets to know me she will change her mind about that. It will not be an issue any more.

R: So have you ever got any comments from...

I: I've had a parent asking me almost similar question as why did I get into child care. I can slightly see in a sense where she is coming from. She was wondering, why a man, choose this career. So I just said to her as I said to you, I just got through my experiences with my daughters. And she said, oh you've got daughters. She realized her daughter was no longer an issue.

R: So your daughters make a huge part, right? And that's reason why I'm asking you about this.

I: Yeah, and that's good that I've feed you back. And then when other people like parents I'm working with, when they say me interacting with the kids, people feedback to me lots of times in the groups that you are really good with the kids. You are really in an active with the kids. Especially in the baby room, parents would see me first time. They will be there for the whole sessions, and when I do the interactions with the children they would see that. They see my relationship with the children [..... parents' reactions towards him being a male teacher]. That makes sense that I have a daughter.

R: Why do you think there are so few men in this area?

I: I think in general in society it's not the society view men who work in child care differently, I think it's the men themselves that think they will be viewed differently.

R: Why do you think is that?

I: I just think all these allegations that made, and the stories you read about pedaphiles you know, that sort of stuff and pressure, that can put men off. There is a lot of pressure from that. And I don't think like that. You know, I grew up with my mon and three sisters, and then my partner and two daughters. It's been pretty female dominated environment for me, my whole life. So I don't think that at all. [...] I see myself as no different to them. I've never think that, I don't do that because people will think me like that... I'll take on their views and questions and I'll speak to them about that. I gave them a wee background, I've grown up with 3 sisters and my mom. And now I have two daughters. And my wife. [...] When I was at college, when I've done my HNC in men and childcare we get expansion on that. There was a whole about 40/50 men, guys to start. And only one guy went to work with the youth, teenagers. The others none got to this route.

I: In this role you mean? I just think I bring... because I was doing manufactory before I was always busy doing, It's always a doing job. There wasn't really thought that go into it. So when I come to work with the children, the first thing was, they need to be doing something. I'm always thinking that way, I'm always thinking, what can we do next, how can I do this. And watching what each child does, what do they like. I'm trying to build up a little profile on head about what they like and why they do certain thing. You know I'm always looking from my own observations to mean sth, to me as well. And not just in a general term how I've made things. I look at things how children do things. Like you asked the other day about putting things in the [], I might find all different reasons for that. Not just the range of stage.

experience before

R: You think you are more open-minded in a way?

I: Yeah. And the approach as well, women are more, I would say more affectionate. But I wouldn't say I was any less affectionate. But I can see, how, so many more men would be. I was brought up with a lot of affection cause my sisters always hugging me and such. I'm not scared to do that with the children, give them cuddles.

Appropriating femininity gender difference

R: So you think that men would be less affectionate but not you because of your background.

I: Yeah.

R: Speaking of that, do you think that children may have different expectations from you and the other female staff?

I: Yeah I think so. In that sort of rough and tumble style ways. They would have more rough and tumble, they climb on you and things like that.

R: Why do you think is that?

I: I don't know. It might be their experiences with their dads, or other males in their life. That's what a man does you know. You would climb on them, we roll around, we kick the football in. And that's quite stereotypical as well. And I don't want I just be like that. I'll give them that if they need it. Cause I'll get some time Jayden climb on my back and that, I know he does that with his dad, cause I've seen that happen. So he is doing exactly with me what he does with his dad. Well, I want this environment to replicate his home environment as well, so I'm quite happy to do that as well.

R: And how about their parents? Do they have different expectations?

I: No. I think as long as you are approachable, it doesn't matter whether you are male or female. If you are approachable, and you are quite welcoming ... you are not like standing there and looking at them all the time.

de-emphasizing gender

uncertainties

I'm not sure whether they are responding to my personality, or whether they are responding to myself. So for instance, I find in the nursery when I say to children, I ask them to do what I want them to do, they tend to respond for me. Not because they are frightened or I may shout to them, because they knew how I deal with things, and they know that I'm not that easy pushover. That's different from men and women. I'm not going to say men are gonna be less pushover because you get strong women too, you get weak women too. But for me I cannot actually tell you whether it's because of I'm a man or not, or whether it's because of my approach to talk to them.

R: So basically you are less pushover, more...

discipline.

I: I don't know if that's accurate either. Because we have a woman down stairs Lisa she is very good, she is very similar to me. We can be on the same, very similar approach.

R: So it's quite interesting when you say men and women are different, that's maybe what you take for granted?

contradicting

I: I would say so, yeah.

R: And on the other hand, you are also thinking you are not sure whether some of your behaviors are related to your gender or personality.

I: Yeah, I think individually, having a big tall man in front of you, is maybe affective.

individuality

R: Can you give some examples of maybe your first intuitions about, what are the kind of aspects that you think men and women are different?

I: Just men and women, forget the children?

R: Yes

I: I would say people are people, people are different first before men and women are different. So there are tendencies, men have their tendencies and women have their tendencies. As I suppose, the mother and father look at the child in the family home, the father is genetically predetermined to keep the child in line to a degree, and the mother is obviously caring and nurturing towards the motherly role. Now obviously that mixes, very different roles of families, but I think there are still very fundamental things we cannot escape. Then we have children are mummies' boys and girls; and you have children are daddies' boys and girls. So I'm not sure. The differences of men and women I suppose, any difference we can draw between men and women, could equally be explained by personality differences. There might be tendencies still, but it would have to be in each case and each person. You can look at me and look at my work, you can say OK, Paul has certain tendencies, he... yeah, I don't know.

6

personality

gender

Fathering
mothering

Example 2: coded children's responses

Sex	Picture 1 Doing what?	Who?	Why?	Which teacher?	Why?	Have you seen him/her doing this?	Others
Boy	She is holding a baby.	- "You just said she. Do you think this is a man or a woman?" - "I don't know." - "So you just said she. Right?" - "He meant a boy." - "And she means a girl?" - "Yeah." - "So you think this is a girl?" (nodding)	Because her baby is in her tummy.	I don't know. [I listed all the names of teachers] Elisa (female)	Because I like Elisa and Paul. [Why this is not Paul?] I love Elisa because I'm gonna invite [Elisa] her to my house. [Why do you like Paul then?] Because the first day [when I came here] I've seen him.	Elisa: No. Paul: No.	[Can Elisa carry a baby or not?] She can carry a baby because she is a girl. And she can put it in the tummy. Dad's can carry a baby but not put them in the tummy. Because they are boys.
Boy	Carrying a baby.	A man.	He's got trousers, a bold head. He doesn't have any hair. Like my dad doesn't, he is bold. Because he has short hair. [Do girls have short hair?] Yeah, some boys have only short hair. [And some boys have longer hair? But why do you think this is a boy? Cause it's kind of a boy who has short hair. [Have you ever seen a boy holding a baby] (nodding)]	[After listing the names] Paul	Because black lines.	No, he doesn't have a baby. I think he will at his home. [Do you think I can carry a baby or not?] Yes, because you are big enough. [Do you think Paul can carry a baby or not?] [He is 43, I don't know if he can. I later checked with Paul and he is actually 33. I went to Flour and told her that. She was unsure about her answer regarding whether Paul can carry a baby. I asked her that 'maybe he can because he is younger than 43'. She nodded with curiosity in her eyes.]	[How about Elisa?] [I don't know how old Elisa is. Carla is 36, she is in the babies today. [Can Carla carry a baby?] Yes. [She is young enough.]
Chinese boy	Cuddle baby	Mummy	Mummy cuddle	Daddy... [Not daddy or mummy] Ulla.		Ulla: Yes. Paul: No. Carla: No. Elisa: No.	
Girl	A mummy is hold a baby.		you said mummy got the baby? The dad and the dad is no.	Paul	Paul not have hair.	Paul: Yes. When they are crying.	[You said this is also mummy, but does mummy not have hair?] Yes. [Then why you think this is mummy] It looks like. [uncertainities in their answers]
Boy	A mom is carrying a baby.		Because she has trousers on. [Does your mom wear trousers?] [Holding] Pauls, the circle... My daddy is not like this, he's got glasses on.	Paul	Because he is a boy. He always wears trousers.	Paul: Yes. [Have you ever seen others carrying a baby?] Carla, Amy, Steacy...	
Boy	A mom and baby		My daddy is not like this, he's got glasses on.	Daddy...	[You said it's mom, why daddy?] The head.		
Girl		Daddy	[But you think this is daddy?] No, it's mummy. [Why?] I don't know. Cause she is hold baby. Daddies don't hold babies. They just look at them in the mummy's hand.	Paul	I don't know.	Paul: No. Carla: Yes. Elisa: Yes.	
Girl	Holding a baby	Mummy		Carla	Because she is a girl.	Carla: Yes. Paul: No.	
Boy	A baby with his mummy		Because if there isn't mummy, there is nothing to look after the baby. [You think only mom looks after the baby?] No, also daddy. [So is this mummy or daddy?] Mummy, because mummies hold babies. [Do fathers hold babies also?] Yeah. Because I got a sister, my daddy can hold him [her].	A teacher. [Which?] Paul.	[Why do you think it's Paul?] Actually I think it's you. [Why?] Because you have a big circle head.	[Do you think I can carry a baby?] No [Why not?] Because you are too thin. [Do you think Paul can carry a baby?] Yeah. [Why?] Because he has strong muscles. [How about Elisa and Carla?] Yes. Cause they also have strong muscles. [Why you think only I don't have strong muscles?] I don't know.	
Girl	Don't know	Mummies		Paul	I don't know.	Paul: No. Carla: No.	
Boy	Don't know	My mummy holding me	My mummy is at home.				
Boy	Holding a baby	Don't know. [A boy or a girl?] Boy	It looks like you. My name is dotty boy. It didn't have long hair, like you. I think she is feeding the baby. [Does daddy feed the baby?] Yes. The baby wants to sleep as well.	Paul	The look like a man.	Paul: Yes. Carla: No.	[Can Carla hold a baby or not?] My mum an daddy can hold a baby, because it's small.
Girl		Mummy		Paul	The baby wants to go somewhere else.	Paul: Yes. Carla: Yes.	
Girl	Baby	Mummy	Because it is.	Paul	Because it is.	Paul: Yes. Carla: Yes.	[If only one of them will hug you, who would you choose?] Paul
Girl	holding a baby	Mummy		Elisa is not in today. It's Carla	Cause it is	Carla: No. Paul: No.	
Girl	Someone is holding a baby	Carla	Cause she carries babies	[Do you see Paul carrying a baby?] No	Only mummies carry babies. Carla is a mummy.		

Example 3: coded observation notes

- A mother approached Ann and started to talk about when to pick up her girl and help during activities.

- Another mother also talked to Ann. [Ask about this]

- Ann was talking to a boy who plays alone in a corner. She touched his head softly.

- Ann sang to the music while preparing breakfast for a boy.

- Ann touched the boys' heads a lot. [Not often with girls - Ask about this].

- A boy went to Kelvin and showed Kelvin a picture he drew. Kelvin said a lot good words about it.

- Again Ann was talking to the mothers.

- A boy kept coming to me and interacting with me. It was the first time we met today.

- Ann was helping the girls take off their clothes.

- Ann often has fun with the kids - by making various voices and play different characters to fun the kids. [E.g pretending to be a monster, using tough voice].

- Ann tries to discipline the boys by asking them not to climb the ladders. She used 'please'. [Kids were more responsive to Ann's words than to other female staff members - ask about this].

- Ann may sing and dance to the music a lot.

- Ann asked a boy to help her with picking up and categorizing the Santa posts.

Kids were doing free activities.

- Ann stopped the kids screaming.

- Ann went outside to deliver the Santa posts, a boy offered to come with her. She then took a few boys away. [A lot of interactions with the boys?] ★

Kelvin was away for meeting from 9:30 - 10:00. Kids may play all kinds of activities altogether, or individually. Gender does not seem to be so salient in the classroom. [Ask for the teachers' perceptions] ?

@10:00 am Kelvin came back. A boy cried when Kelvin did not allow him to leave his table. Kelvin comforted him using soft words and the boys stopped crying.

- A father came and greeted Kelvin ONLY before he left.

- The same boy was about to cry again, but Ann told him to stop straightforwardly.

- Ann was playing with a girl by pretending fell asleep.

- A girl was crying. Ann tried to calm her down with soft words and cuddling. Ann used dolls to fun the girl.

- Ann kissed the girl's hand and sang to her, and cuddled her a lot.

@10:20 am Organized activity - Christmas party games.

- Ann sit among the kids with the girl who just cried in her arm. She sang and danced with the kids.

@10:30 am Organized activity - numeracy

- Ann disciplined a boy using loud and strict voices. Ann seems to be the one who is 'disciplining' often. [Ask about this]

@11:40 am Kelvin was changing nappies for the kids.

- Ann kissed a boy during lunch time.

@12:00 am Kids were having lunch.

- Ann asked a boy to slow down by orally telling him to wait for a while.

- My presence as positive figures:

Some boys played finger games with me. A boy initiated this and others joined after seeing my interactions with the boy.

- Kelvin whistled with the boys.

@12:40 pm Music started.

- Ann was dancing with a boy.

- Ann made really loud voices, she seemed to be really happy playing.

- A boy lay down on the sofa with Ann. they are very intimating.

@13:55 pm Ann stood on a chair to catch every child's attention. A boy modeled her

Styles.

emotional
needs.

Glossary

<i>bianzhi</i>	tenure
<i>bie</i>	differences
<i>gaokao</i>	national exam for entrance to universities and colleges in Mainland China
<i>nanren</i>	men/male
<i>nvhanzi</i>	<i>masculine female</i>
<i>nvren</i>	women/female
<i>xing</i>	sex
<i>xingbie</i>	gender/sex
<i>yang</i>	generally representing man/male in Chinese philosophy
<i>ying</i>	generally representing woman/female in Chinese philosophy
<i>youeryuan</i>	kindergartens

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