



## The Role of Teachers in a Gender-Responsive Classroom

**Author:** Dr. Kulajit Khaneeyor, Thiri Su  
**Degree:** Doctoral degree / master's degree  
**Major:** Education  
**Academic year:** 2023  
**Email:** chitapa.y.rmutr@gmail.com

An understanding of gender roles in children at the early childhood level is important as gender roles play a significant role in the development of children in society. Gender roles in children shape their self-concept and how they socialize and form relationships. The teacher's role in the early childhood classroom is necessary in achieving a good balance in the child's gender development. At the early childhood period, the child will encounter a wide variety of approaches to gender, and their process of socialization is differentiated between genders. The teacher's input and guidance have an impact on the child's organization of gender within the society. UNESCO-International Institute for Educational Planning defines gender-responsive pedagogy as "the teaching and learning processes which pay attention to the learning needs of boys and girls". The learning materials, methodologies, content, learning activities, language use, classroom interaction, assessments, are all cautiously and carefully responding to the specific needs of boys and girls.

Teachers have a very important role in promoting gender inclusion and sensitivity in the classroom through his/her instructional strategies. The school must realize the importance of providing a quality, relevant education to close the enrolment gap between boys and girls, and this will help ensure that boys and girls fully realize the benefits of education. Boys and girls must have equal opportunities and rights to receiving an education so that they can contribute to their society and the society can simultaneously benefit from their contributions. This paper looks at ways the teacher can conduct a gender-responsive classroom through their instructional practices at the early childhood level. This paper also looks at why a gender sensitivity and inclusion education system are important to achieve. Scholarly research on gender-responsive pedagogy will be highlighted. Innovative Resources (2018) states that early childhood educators have an important role to play in modelling equal and respectful relationships through curriculum, learning environments and interactions with children. The early years in a child's life is a critical time when children's ideas of gender roles are formed and the foundations for respectful play, friendships, and relationships are established. These idea formations can limit and influence children's aspirations in building and approaching a relationship. Innovative Resources discusses opportunities for early childhood educators to encourage conversation and reflection with children that promote gender equality through

Chi (2018) states that it is important to consider the cognitive and affective formation of gender identity which develops in early childhood. The researcher mentions that as China makes rapid progress in early childhood education, and develops policy to build up the teacher force, it also incorporated gender equality into teacher policy. The pedagogical practices to ensure gender-responsiveness in early childhood education teaching and learning is established in teacher training. The researcher comments that incorporating a gender perspective into early childhood teaching unlocks children's potential at the very foundation of their development, and this impact can go a long way.

Care Inspectorate (2020) aims to boost awareness of the positive benefits of encouraging and supporting gender equality from an early age. It was mentioned that in 2018, Maree Todd, Minister for Children and Young People said, "Evidence shows that gender stereotyping from a very early age has an impact on the decision that girls and boys make about their future subject and career choices. This guide explains the importance of challenging gender stereotyping and provides ideas and examples for early years professionals of existing good practice." UNESCO Bangkok (2007) states that building strong foundations for gender equality in early childhood offers lifelong benefits for children, their families, and communities. Interventions are needed at several levels. Work with parents and family caregivers to help them understand and stop discrimination against boys and girls. They should be encouraged to have equal and appropriate expectations of boys and girls and promote equal opportunities for them.

- Train early childhood educators to be gender sensitive. Encourage male early childhood educators as young boys will benefit from male role models.
- Have gender-responsive curriculum guidelines in national curriculum and curriculum frameworks that address gender equality.



- Have gender-sensitive instructional resources and make sure that gender stereotypes are not reflected in story books and other learning materials.
- Increase respect and appreciation for early childhood educators. Community recognition and appreciation is important to sustain the good work of early childhood educators.

Muasya (2021) states that teacher's ideas and beliefs whether gender-sensitive or not are more likely to impact on pre-primary school children's lives differently. Children in their early formative years nurture values, attitudes, life skills and virtues given to them by their teachers. Thus, gender-sensitive teachers are likely to shape children's mindset in a positive way. The researcher aims to examine the extent to which teachers are grounded on gender pedagogical discourses during their pre-service teacher training programs. The researcher makes the point that early childhood teachers who are familiar with the factors that influence formation of children's gender identity and stereotype can effectively counteract and neutralise gender bias in the classroom. Thus, there is a need to integrate gender-neutral, sensitive, and responsive pedagogical issues in teachers' professional development.

The researchers used the social structure and Habitus Theory by Bourdieu to find out how the social structure and habitus exist in ECE institutions. Early childhood, as part of the social structure of society, is often considered not important in the concept of gender. But this perception greatly influences what is generally accepted in ECE during play. Boys are more involved in games that involve construction, physicality, and planned sports. Girls are more involved in literacy activities, fine motor skills, etc. Boys often get gifts in the form of Legos, vehicles, sports equipment, etc. Girls get dolls, kitchen utensils, art kits, etc.

The researchers go into gender socialization which can be seen in the behaviours of children aged 1-2 years, when they show a clear preference for the type of toys. The researchers are not of the opinion that boys and girls be socialized into gender-specific games because play is not gender exclusive. Boys and girls have the right to experience all kinds of benefits for children and games should not be divided along gender lines. The researchers discuss teachers' perception of gender in early childhood. The concept of gender formation is carried out from an early age, and thus the teacher also shapes how gender is constructed. Differences in gender roles become evident in children at an early age. When children of 3 years of age show different communication styles, participate in different activities, play more with same-sex friends, and tend to avoid making friends of the opposite sex, the influence is believed to have come from the encouragement of the teachers. The researchers believe that this view has an impact and limitations that gender can have on a child's sense of identity. The researchers underscore that all learning and experience sources can be accessed by all children without gender differences because they benefit boys and girls. Learning environments for children in ECE institutions need to be built by applying the values and principles of justice, promoting education with justice, sensitivity, and gender responsiveness.

### **Gender Differences in the Classroom**

Hurst (2021) states that gender differences in childhood development, such as physical ability, intellectual development, and self-esteem, can be applied in successful approaches to classroom learning. It was mentioned that research studies have identified areas of differences between boys and girls. Research studies have revealed some distinguishing characteristics of boys and girls: Boys tend to have trouble sitting still for lengthy periods and thus reading, colouring activities are more difficult for boys. Also, boys tend to develop their physical and motor skills through participation in sports. Girls tend to enjoy sedentary activities, and they have slightly better abilities in fine motor skills. The educational implications of gender differences between boys and girls are that the curriculum should provide equal opportunities for boys and girls to maximize their physical well-being through physical education classes and group sports.

**Cognitive Abilities and Achievement motivation.**

It was observed that boys and girls typically perform equally well in standardized assessments. In cognitive abilities, researchers have identified. Girls perform slightly higher in verbal ability exercises. Girls are typically more engaged in classroom activities, persist, and are more likely to graduate. Girls typically choose language and literature-based courses. Boys perform slightly higher in visual-spatial exercises. They tend to show greater variability in cognitive abilities, appearing at the extreme upper and lower ends in assessment scores. Boys typically choose math and physical science courses. The educational implications of gender differences of boys and girls are that curriculum should provide more opportunities in reading and writing for boys, and science and mathematics for girls. These opportunities would promote achievement and appreciation for the uncomfortable subject matter.

**Interpersonal Behaviour and Relationships:** Boys are more likely to engage in aggressive and bullying behaviours without being provoked. Boys tend to hang out in large groups of other boys, and usually participate in physical play, group games, and risk-taking activities.



Girls demonstrate their aggressiveness in non-physical ways, like spreading rumours, giving mean stress, etc. Girls engage in more cooperative play and are more aware of other girls mental and emotional states. The educational implications of gender differences of boys and girls are that classrooms should provide more opportunities for cooperative group work and more frequent interactions with classmates. This would take advantage of boys' tendencies to play in big groups and girls' tendencies to engage in cooperative activities. Nduagbo (2020) looks into what schools can do to alleviate issues related to gender: • Learn about gender biases Administrators must encourage teachers to take on reflective practices through professional development and trainings to become aware of their own gender biases and learn to treat students that are consistent with students' identities. Educators and school principals should write supportive gender policies that address privacy and disclosure, student records and information systems, etc. • Change classroom culture Teachers can create gender-inclusive classroom cultures by using gendered language such as friends, scholars, students, etc. Teachers can engage in conversations about biases, discriminations, and prejudices, and encourage students to discover who they are. Fight gender stereotypes: Raise awareness of the tendency to rate boys than girls in subjects like science, engineering, and technology.

Require students to identify and analyse gender stereotypes and expectations within the context of story taught. Teachers can use texts or stories that demonstrate self-worth and happiness do not stem from physical appearances. Familiarize students with real individuals or characters who have non-gender stereotypical professions or positively challenge gender stereotypes, such as male nurses and female scientists.

Zulkarnaini and Adriany (2020) conduct a study to investigate gender equality in ECE institutions in Indonesia. The researchers state to overcome gender bias in ECE, gender aware pedagogy and gender sensitive curriculum are needed. The researchers discuss that in early childhood learning, it is important to develop learning towards gender balance. To minimize gender bias that occurs in ECE institutions, there needs to be an effort to clearly include the concept of gender equity in the curriculum, the entire education process. Corresponding to social development in early childhood is the formation of one's own gender. Verbal and non-verbal interactions with other children and with teachers greatly influence communication competence. Realizing gender justice is by facilitating understanding and reflection of gender to be provided by teachers, as the teacher can consciously construct gender equity in early childhood.

The researcher mentions play as a powerful factor against gender development as children play with gender meanings, play roles in different categories, and build their own gender identity. Children also learn when socializing during play learning activities in early childhood. The researcher states that every child has the right to play. The games they want play can be played without any social construct affecting them. Playing opportunities can facilitate children's interest.

The researcher concludes that the teacher must fully understand the gender imbalance that exists to be more gender equitable to children, especially in early childhood. The situation calls for gender equality discourse in ECE institutions on curriculum, social environment interactions and games. Ananga (2021) conducts a study on the use of gender-responsive pedagogy in Ghana's initial teacher training program. The researcher addresses how much teachers use gender-responsive pedagogy. This practice calls for teachers to take an all-encompassing gender approach to the processes of lesson planning, teaching, classroom management and performance. The researcher states that in 2015, College of Education tutors in Ghana started adopting gender-responsive pedagogy in their lessons. According to the Gender Handbook published in 2018, teachers are expected to:

- Give equal chance to boys and girls to ask and answer questions in class, providing extra encouragement to girls who may lack confidence.
- Ensure equal participation of boys and girls in group work, debates, and role play.
- Pay attention to the positioning of boys and girls during group work, assigning leadership roles to girls.
- Ensure that girls have equal access to teaching and learning materials such as books, desks, etc., particularly if boys are more assertive and take resources first.
- Be patient with boys and girls who may be shy or afraid to speak.
- Check to see if both boys and girls understand the lesson.
- Provide constructive and positive verbal feedback to both boys and girls in class.

The researcher reports his findings: There is a significant improvement for teachers' demonstration of gender responsive pedagogy (GRP). In 2015, 1.8% of male teachers demonstrated GRP, in 2017, 46% of male teachers demonstrated GRP, and in 2018, 68% of male teachers demonstrated GRP in their teaching. In 2015, 3.6% of female teachers demonstrated GRP, in 2018, 64.4% of female teachers demonstrated GRP in their teaching. During focus group discussions and interviews, the researcher finds most teachers mentioned they have a good



understanding of GRP. They further mentioned that GRP eliminated gender biases and stereotypes from the classroom. Teachers added that GRP makes them:

- a) Ensure that all students participate in class discussion, not allowing anyone to dominate the discussion.
- b) Seating arrangements ensure an even spread of boys and girls.
- c) Teachers are mindful of their choice of words and language in the classroom, using more collective inclusive words like scholars, students, etc.

Teachers mentioned that some textbooks and reading materials are not gender sensitive, making it challenging for teachers. The researcher is of the opinion that textbooks used in schools need to be seriously revised, aligning with gender responsive teaching and learning.

### Gender Issues in Curriculum

Paechter (2013) states that a curriculum is considered gendered in two main ways:

- Different subjects are associated with masculinity and femininity.
- Teachers teach different material, or treat it differently, according to whether they are teaching girls or boys.

The researcher elaborates on the first gendered way- different subjects are associated with masculinity and femininity:

In most Western countries, mathematics, science, and technology are seen as masculine subject areas. Humanities and languages tend to be associated with femininity. In England and Wales, although attainment in mathematics is appropriately equal for girls and boys, it is still strongly marked as masculine. Vocational curriculum is very strongly gendered that students end up being educated in almost single sex classroom. The researcher adds that the gender markings is mediated by society. The high-status areas are seen as masculine and lower status ones as feminine. The gendering makes students feel uncomfortable if they enjoy or are good at subjects labelled for the other gender. Girls are less likely to study mathematics, science, and technology, giving up on high status and better salaried careers. Boys are less likely to study humanities and languages, closing down the other options. The researcher elaborates on the second gendered way involving teachers directly. The problem arises when they teach boys and girls differently, and one gender receives an impoverished curriculum. The researcher mentions that it was found that British teachers taught the same material very differently and that both sexes could lose out. It was also found that in Australia, teachers teaching to boys only groups focused on “war, guns, and tough things”. The researcher also makes the point that gender is infrequently addressed in National Curriculum Provision. Although Sweden and South Africa have an explicit commitment to address gender inequality through education, evidence shows that it does not reflect in practice to the content or outcomes to the curriculum. Plan International (2017) states that early childhood curriculums engaging parents, caregivers, community leaders and educators are fundamentally important in order to provide girls with the chance and opportunities to realize their rights and live a life of dignity. This movement is to promote the rationale for investing in gender-transformative early childhood curriculums to break the cycle of gender discrimination and advance gender equality.

Gender-transformative curriculums have the explicit intention to transform unequal power relations. Early childhood is the most important phase of development when cognitive, social, and emotional skills are learned influencing lifelong educational achievement. When young girls and boys are denied access to equal opportunities in education, care, and services, the rest of their lives are affected.

It is during their early years that boys and girls learn gendered attitudes. Children interact mostly with parents, caregivers, other family members and teachers. Children are exposed to how girls and boys, women and men should behave, their social worth and what their role is and is expected to be in society. Learning rules and expectations in terms of behaviours and roles can be limiting to children, depending on the exposure. Early childhood curriculums that support young girls and boys to develop to their full potential would challenge “traditional”, inter-generational cycle of gender discrimination. Kambouri-Danos and Evans (2019) conduct a study to identify children’s perception of gender and compare the social environment, surrounding the child analysing how much of the child’s perceptions reflect that of the surrounding practitioners and parents. The researchers report their findings presented into three themes:

- Gender as a Disadvantage

The perception of gender being a disadvantage is usually for girls.

- Practitioners highlighted that gender stereotypes were reinforced by television and toys and that clear differences during children’s playtime were apparent.

- 38% of parents felt that parents can be more physically playful with their sons as they felt the boys are stronger and more robust.

- 50% of parents felt that girls faced a disadvantage as society expects more of them and imposes more social restrictions on girls than boys.



- 75% of practitioners observed differences in gender behaviour- boys predominantly engaging in physical, agentic attributed play, and girls predominantly engaging in creative and communal attributed play.

The researchers recommend that the early years environment should follow gender-equality practices and pedagogies, especially during 5-6 years of age when the self-confidence in girls may reduce. Educators and parents should also promote gender flexibility and should accept the different choices made by children. Wang (2021) conducts a study to provide insight into gender bias on children's development by dissecting a feminist movie, "Dangal". This movie challenges decades of stereotypical roles of females. The movie depicts a former wrestling champion (Mahavir) who chose to train his two daughters (Geeta and Babita) to become outstanding female wrestlers and win national honours. In such a patriarchal society, most women were doomed to take domestic responsibilities as housewives at a young age. Mahavir insisted on supporting his daughters to make decisions on their own lives, defying Indian norms. Geeta and Babita comprehended their father's great love, and they were determined to fight against gender stereotypes within the Indian society.

The researcher connects the experiences of Geeta and Babita with real life issues in early childhood education. In the movie, there were voices from women who accepted such patriarchal values as their social rules. The silenced voices are those children whose imagination and future development were suppressed. Mahavir's tenacity in defying gender stereotypes was the key factor in his daughters' childhood transformation. There was little involvement from schools and educators in this movie, but Geeta and Babita successfully broke through the stereotypical boundaries. The researcher discusses that "normalizing" gender attitudes, whether consciously or unconsciously, always exist in children's families, schools, and communities. This can have an impact on children's personality, development, and career pathways. It is important for educators themselves to reflect on their own gender attitudes and question their educational practices.

Parents' positive attitude towards gender-awareness can serve as a role model on children's gender construction. Educators must collaborate with other professional and families to modify and develop relevant policies to achieve a gender-equity learning environment.

### **A Gender-Responsive Classroom**

Mulvahill (2017) states that it is important for every teacher to think about ways to communicate with students about gender so that every student has the space they need to fit in. The researcher gives some useful ideas on how to create a more gender-inclusive classroom. The teacher can ask the students simple questions about what it means to be a boy or a girl. The researcher adds that at 5 years of age, children have some strong notions about gender roles. For example, girls wear pink, boys wear blue, girls play with dolls, boys play with cars, etc. Don't just correct stereotyped beliefs- challenge them. For example, the teacher can correct by saying, "Of course, boys can wear pink." And then challenge, "Who made that rule?" The researcher explains that this challenge would give students the chance to think through their beliefs and encourage them to question their thinking.

Watch your language: Teachers must avoid gender-specific language when speaking to the class. Instead, teachers should refer to them as a collective, as in children or kindergarteners. Or choose something that has nothing to do with gender, for example, "If your birthday is in March, you may line up first." Teachers do not need a girls' bathroom pass and a boys' bathroom pass. There needs to be just a bathroom pass. Any folder, basket, container should not be labelled boy or girl. Make sure toys and activities are open to everyone. Teachers must ensure that boys and girls are free to explore with blocks, stuffed animals, art supplies, tea sets, cars, dolls, etc.

Provide Education (2022) gives guidance to promote gender equality in the classroom:

- Ensure educational materials are free from gender stereotypes. Textbooks, reading materials, storybooks, etc. must be gender sensitive.
- Address phrases like "you play like a girl" or "man up" by pointing out gender implications and helping to find alternative phrases.
- Avoid segregating boys and girls into separate lines, separate sports activities. Instead, mix seating in the classroom.
- Mix boys and girls to work on projects together.
- Challenge expectations of professions typically associated with a particular gender for example, a teacher can mention a female construction worker or a male nurse.
- Help students identify instances of gender bias through awareness activities or historical events, laws, or cultural changes.

Red Box Teachers (2021) states that setting a standard for gender equality in the classroom can play a significant part in learning, and teachers can help eliminate gender inequality starting from early childhood years. One good way is to avoid separating boys and girls in the classroom or in activities and games. Separating students inhibits socializing with each other, and it does not allow the students to feel comfortable when seen.



Teachers must encourage boys to listen, and girls to voice out their opinions at an early age. Boys are observed to frequently interrupt girls when they are speaking, subconsciously feeling what girls have to say is less important. Teachers must avoid well-ingrained stereotypes such as pink for girls, blue for boys. It is recommended that teachers avoid commenting on girls' appearance and focus on complimenting on their achievements and ideas. Children are inspired by stories that they can relate to. Reading books about women becoming scientists, men becoming nurses would help equal job opportunities and goals as they grow up.

Vendrell et al. (2014) aim to present a protocol in assessing gender equality in their study. The protocol develops a quantitative and qualitative descriptive analysis of education in gender equality, as well as an analysis of one's own behaviour. This study develops an analysis on the approach to gender equity in schools for children between 3 and 6 years of age in Catalonia, Spain. The researchers obtained data from 9 schools with the aim of interviewing the teachers, who filled in the questionnaires together with a member of the managing team. The interview was semi-structured, with 6 questions related to the questionnaire's functionality, and educational practices at school.

### Conclusion

Gender roles in society have to do with what society's expectations are about how one should dress, act, speak, and conduct ourselves according to our gender. How a child presents him/herself to the society can be shaped and perfected at a very young age. Although the child has several influential factors to gain impact on his/her gender development, the teacher can be said to have the most impact.

Gender-responsive pedagogy at the early childhood level is a very important start to introduce the child to gender. At this early juncture of a child's life, gender equality can be instilled. Gender equality is when both boys and girls have equal rights, responsibilities, and opportunities especially in the educational setting. Gender equality teaches no violence against the weaker gender in physical strength. Society must value both genders to live in a safe society. Children must have gender equality values inculcated in them at a very young age in their treatment of and interaction with each other- respectfully.

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