Addressing gender inequalities from the early years of education

Key findings

• Despite global gender parity in access to pre-primary education, girls and boys continue to have different classroom experiences. Gender biases and stereotypes are frequently reproduced in teacher-student interactions, play, pre-primary education curricula, and teaching and learning materials.

• There is a need to proactively and explicitly incorporate gender-responsiveness into the design and implementation of pre-primary education services and boldly promote gender-transformative strategies with a system-wide perspective.

• Policies should be aligned to the five core components of quality pre-primary education systems: planning and budgeting, curriculum development and implementation, workforce development, family and community engagement, and quality assurance.

• Teachers play a crucial role in building gender-transformative pre-primary education systems and influencing caregiving practices in homes. Practitioners should bring gender awareness to their classroom practices by reflecting on any gender stereotypical attitudes they may have, especially towards children, and by being critical on how the teaching and learning materials they select could perpetuate gender biases.
Context

Access to pre-primary education has increased significantly in the past two decades and, based on current global enrolment rates, boys and girls are participating equally. However, despite this gender parity in access, the pre-primary education system does not always deliver on its potential to tackle gender inequalities and address harmful gender stereotypes and norms while they are being internalized and formed by the youngest learners. There is, therefore, a need to proactively incorporate gender-responsive and gender-transformative strategies into the design and implementation of pre-primary education systems to address gender inequalities.

What do we know?

Gender stereotypes and biases can appear from the first years of a child’s life. As early as the ages of two and three, children begin to gain insight into certain cultural gender stereotypes.\(^1\) They begin to acquire gender stability around three-and-a-half years old,\(^2\) and gender biases about girls’ and boys’ intelligence may be formed as early as age six.\(^3\) It is important to deconstruct these biases and stereotypes from a young age, as doing so can become more difficult with the onset of puberty due to an increased desire to comply with social expectations and pressures related to gender.\(^4\)

Current global pre-primary enrolment figures reflect gender parity, with boys and girls enjoying almost equal access in most instances.\(^5\) The early childhood education (ECE) system, therefore, has significant potential to play a role in tackling gender inequalities and gender socialization processes, addressing gender stereotypes and harmful gender norms at the time they are being acquired.

Children’s experiences in pre-primary education may, however, reinforce and reproduce gender stereotypes. Behind overall gender parity figures, boys and girls might still have different classroom experiences. Studies have found that pre-primary educators often uphold gender stereotypes through their interactions with children, their selection of learning materials, and through gendered childhood play.\(^6\),\(^7\)

Pre-primary teachers and educators play a crucial role in supporting gender equality at the preschool level. Studies from a range of contexts\(^8\),\(^9\) have observed that pre-primary teachers give more attention to boys and have lower expectations of girls. Assessments undertaken by Plan International in 11 Asian countries found that teachers held stereotypical attitudes about boys’ and girls’ achievements and roles. For example, they attributed academic achievement in girls to hard work but in boys to natural ability or competency at certain subjects.\(^10\)

Gender bias and stereotyping in textbooks are among the biggest challenges in the road to gender equality in education.\(^11\),\(^12\) This is a particular challenge in developing countries, where research shows that teachers rely heavily on textbooks, reproducing rather than contesting stereotypes contained within.\(^13\)

Gender roles are assigned by society, and reflect cultural, religious and political beliefs.\(^14\) Gender norms are learned through life, but parents and caregivers are the primary agents of socialization, especially at an early age.\(^15\) The interactions and behaviours children observe among their caregivers influence how they see the world, and themselves in it.\(^16\) Parents and immediate family may consciously or unconsciously transfer gender norms to their children through different paths.\(^17\)
What should we do?

There is a need to proactively incorporate gender-responsive and gender-transformative strategies into the design and implementation of ECE systems. Without this explicit attention, the pre-primary education system may instead reinforce and reproduce gender inequality. To develop effective gender-transformative ECE systems, policies should target all five components of the system (as outlined in UNICEF’s Build to Last Conceptual Framework), with specific strategies including:

**Planning and budgeting**
Application of gender mainstreaming in the planning, budgeting and management processes of financial, human and physical resources to integrate gender in all steps of national policy and programming, and ensure the equitable and efficient provision of pre-primary education. Gender-responsive planning and budgeting aim for resources to be equitably distributed between boys and girls, thus contributing towards mitigating gender inequalities and improving prospects and opportunities for gender equality and empowerment.

**Curriculum development and implementation**
Gender equality should be a high priority in pre-primary curricula to ensure that girls and boys have equal opportunities to learn, and that teaching materials and textbooks do not reinforce gender norms and stereotypes. A gender-focused lens can be used for curriculum development, review or reform to actively promote gender-transformative perspectives. Revision of textbook materials is also important to ensure they adopt a focus on learning through play, and to remove illustrations that preserve gender stereotypes (such as showing men in STEM positions and portraying women primarily as caregivers).

**Workforce development**
This includes the implementation of gender-responsive recruitment, and professional development and retention strategies targeting teachers and other personnel. These measures should ensure that both men and women engaged in the delivery of pre-primary education at different levels in the system have the necessary competencies and support to promote children’s development and learning, alongside opportunities for growth in a gender-transformative environment. Training teachers in gender-transformative pedagogy and enabling men and women to play non-stereotypical roles are important ways to bring gender awareness to the classroom and to respond to children’s specific needs. A variety of tools and guidelines have been developed to help pre-primary education practitioners incorporate gender considerations into their practice.

**Family and community engagement**
Early learning programmes have a huge potential to engage parents and families to examine gendered roles, aspirations and expectations and influencing parents’ actions, practices, beliefs and knowledge to create the environment and conditions for positive gender socialization of the child. Moreover, well-designed ECE provision can also contribute to youth livelihoods, families’ economic empowerment and women’s employment opportunities.

**Quality assurance**
Pre-primary education quality assurance mechanisms should be gender-responsive. This can be achieved by developing gender-transformative quality standards and indicators, and by collecting sex-disaggregated data that informs how gender plays a role in access, enrolment and pedagogical practices in the classroom.

All strategies and policies summarized above are presented in more detail in the ‘Tackling gender inequality from the early years: strategies for building a gender-transformative pre-primary education system’ report and associated briefs (see Further Reading, below). While the strategies are outlined separately, building a coherent and gender-transformative pre-primary education system would require them to align with one another.
Incorporating a gender perspective is essential for achieving gender-transformative ECE. Viet Nam is one of the few countries with high coverage of pre-primary education (gross enrolment rates above 92 per cent) with gender parity. Government strategies to build a more gender-transformative ECE system in Viet Nam are aligned and integrated into multiple components of the system. Some of these activities are summarized below:

**Figure 1: Strategies to address gender equality through the pre-primary education system in Viet Nam**

- **Planning and budgeting**
  The Ministry of Education and Training (MoET) Education Sector Analysis in 2017 called for “inclusive education with gender equality, inclusion and climate change” to be “considered in the process of designing, appraisal, approval and funds allocation of the projects related to general education.”

- **Quality assurance**
  MoET’s reporting systems regularly collect disaggregated data by province, gender, ethnicity and, more recently, disability. MoET’s quality assurance department is also involved in the development of the new pre-primary curriculum.

- **Curriculum development and review**
  In 2020, MoET announced a three-year review of the preschool curriculum. The review team includes a gender subgroup to ensure that gender-responsiveness is embedded as a cross-cutting topic. A new curriculum is expected to be ready in 2023.

- **Workforce development**
  Since the early 2000s, MoET has implemented several in-service training programmes, often in partnership with international development agencies. These include training by VVOB with over 1,800 ECE teachers and staff on play-based and gender-responsive education, affecting around 32,000 children.

- **Family and community engagement**
  The government encourages a policy of socialization in preschool, arguing that it should be the responsibility of everyone and that the cost of provision should be shared by parents, the community and the government. Development partners have also delivered parent engagement activities as part of their support to the ECE system.

- **Assessing**
  MoET’s reporting systems regularly collect disaggregated data by province, gender, ethnicity and, more recently, disability.
What are the remaining evidence gaps?

Evidence on effective advocacy strategies for achieving high-level political will or buy-in of gender-responsive and gender-transformative measures at the system level. It is necessary to understand what strategies work across different contexts to engage governments, private providers and other institutions, such as pre-service and in-service teacher training providers, to generate a supportive, enabling environment that incorporates gender-responsiveness into pre-primary education systems and promotes gender-transformative approaches through early learning settings.

Further reading


References

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UNICEF Innocenti receives financial support from the Government of Italy, while funding for specific projects is also provided by other governments, international institutions and private sources, including UNICEF National Committees. The findings, interpretations and conclusions expressed in this paper are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the policies or views of UNICEF. Extracts from this publication may be freely reproduced with due acknowledgement. Requests to utilize larger portions or the full publication should be addressed to the Communications Unit at: researchpublications@unicef.org

For readers wishing to cite this document, we suggest the following form: Addressing gender inequalities from the early years of education, UNICEF Innocenti – Global Office of Research and Foresight, 2022.

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