

Original Paper

Promoting Gender Equality in Early Childhood Education: Lessons from the Nordic Countries

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Abstract

Education plays a pivotal role in promoting gender equality and Early Childhood Education (ECE) is fast emerging as a new frontier to achieve this. The Nordic countries lead the pack in advancing gender equality in ECE, setting an exemplary standard for other nations. On one hand, they have included gender mainstreaming in their policies and regulations regarding ECE. By using Gender Equality Planning and Gender certificates, they ensure that gender equality is integral to ECE at the institutional level. On the other hand, the Nordic countries have also systematically advanced gender equality in ECE from various perspectives. They have done this by improving gender balance in the teaching workforce, integrating gender equality education into teacher training programs, and providing gender equality education in kindergarten settings. These experiences offer valuable insights for countries worldwide aiming to promote gender equality in the ECE stage.

Keyword

gender equality, Nordic countries, early childhood education stage (ECE stage)

Gender equality is a pressing global issue, and promoting it is essential to safeguard social fairness and justice. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, introduced in 1948, recognizes gender equality as a fundamental element of human rights, emphasizing that women should enjoy equal rights as men. Since then, gender equality has been acknowledged as one of the core principles concerning social harmony and sustainable development, highlighting its significance. In China, President Xi Jinping stressed in his speech at the United Nations High-Level Meeting on the 25th Anniversary of the Fourth World Conference on Women that gender equality must become a shared code of conduct and value standards for all members of society.

Education has always been an essential area to promote gender equality in all countries. The United

Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) advocates for comprehensive promotion of gender equality at all levels of education, ranging from ECE to higher education. In 2015, the Incheon Declaration, adopted at the World Education Forum, highlighted the significance of gender equality in realizing the right to education for all. It pledged to support gender-responsive policies, planning, and learning environments, integrate gender issues into teacher training and the curriculum, and eliminate discrimination and violence in schools. Gender equality, as a global cultural norm, has set the foundation for social and educational development. Countries worldwide are committed to eliminating gender differences at all education stages, striving to achieve gender equality within education and cultivating an equal, inclusive, and fair educational environment.

The ECE stage is fundamental for lifelong learning and a critical stage for supporting children's growth, cultivating future social citizens, and addressing complex gender issues within education. Therefore, it has become a new battleground for promoting gender equality in the education field. Nordic countries are particularly at the forefront of promoting gender equality in the ECE stage, surpassing other countries worldwide. According to the Global Gender Gap Report 2020 released by the World Economic Forum, Iceland leads as the country with the best gender equality, followed by Norway, Finland, and Sweden, with Denmark ranking 14th. Hence, these countries can be regarded as "paradises of gender equality", continuing to lead the world in the pursuit of this crucial goal.

Nordic countries have always believed that education has the potential to eliminate gender inequality in social institutions and organizations throughout a person's life. Therefore, they treat promoting gender equality and diversity as a civic skill that should be learned and practiced throughout the entire education system. Nordic countries attach great importance to promoting gender equality comprehensively from the ECE stage, and their valuable experience in implementing gender equality in this stage can serve as a reference for other countries and regions.

1. ECE Stage: A New Battleground for Promoting Gender Equality

In recent years, Nordic societies have comprehensively developed gender equality and anti-discrimination policies, with many countries including gender equality and fairness in schools into legislation to provide equitable education for all students. This has garnered considerable attention on gender equality in schools and kindergartens. Particularly, the ECE stage has gradually become a new battleground for promoting gender equality for several reasons.

Firstly, from a societal perspective, promoting gender equality in the ECE stage firstly helps to address the issue of gender imbalance in the entire labor market and makes kindergartens a model for a more gender-equal society. Since the first division of labor in primitive society, many professions have been divided by gender, and the resulting gender differences in occupations remain very stable today. Since the beginning of public education in Western society, the roles of men and women have been separated. On average across all OECD countries, women make up over two-thirds of teachers from ECE to higher education (Suo & Wang, 2021). Kindergartens involve taking care of and nurturing young

children, and are seen as a predominantly female domain, making early childhood educators a highly gendered profession (Zhang, 2017). ECE is one of the most gender-segregated occupational fields. According to relevant data, the proportion of female teachers in the ECE stage is 97%, based on the OECD average (Yang, 2018). Therefore, addressing the gender imbalance between male and female teachers in the ECE field is an important component in optimizing the overall gender structure of the labor market. One of the important tasks in promoting gender equality in the ECE field is to break down gender barriers, so that it becomes common knowledge that ‘ECE is not just a job for women, but a job that anyone can do’, and to provide equal job opportunities for men in the ECE field. Encouraging more men to be active in the ECE field can also promote diversity in male roles, counteracting the excessive restrictions and discrimination imposed by traditional gender culture that only emphasizes masculine traits. This will fully display the more diverse qualities of male roles, and prevent discrimination against male educators in the kindergarten profession. On this basis, kindergartens can become a model for a more gender-equal society.

Secondly, from a kindergarten perspective, promoting gender equality in ECE can help reconstruct the gender system and culture within kindergarten settings and provide a new understanding of early childhood educators’ professionalism. ECE is one of the most gender-segregated fields, and is typically described as a “female domain” (Peeters et al., 2015). The gender system and culture within kindergartens have a clear “female-dominated” character, which is reflected in aspects such as team culture, work arrangements, social and emotional relationships, environment, materials, educational activities, and the reactions of educators towards girls and boys. This hinders efforts to address gender imbalances among teachers in the ECE stage; studies have shown that improvements in salaries and working conditions alone are not enough to significantly change the gender imbalance among early childhood educators in countries like France and Belgium, where higher wages for such professionals have not led to an increased proportion of male teachers. This is because these measures do not effectively address the deeply entrenched, female-dominated gender system and culture (Peeters et al., 2015). Meanwhile, early childcare and education have always been based on the special concept of “motherly care”, and the professionalism of early childhood educators is personified by mimicking the image of a “caring mother”. Therefore, early childcare and education have been viewed as work that women should naturally do, and are more skilled at. The idealized image of early childhood educators has always been the motherly female figure. As a result, the professionalism of male teachers is more likely to be questioned, and it may be believed that they are unable to provide high-quality care and education for children. On the other hand, such a gender system and culture also hinders the involvement of fathers in kindergarten education. Research has found that most of the activities organized by kindergartens for parents are rooted in female culture, and as a result, 90% of mothers participate in these activities (Peeters, 2007). If there were more male teachers in the kindergarten, a culture of “men also have a place” could be created, and male teachers could become role models for young fathers, making them more likely to participate in the care and education of their children.

Ultimately, promoting gender equality in ECE is essential to achieving multiple gender identities and creating more inclusive systems and cultures.

Finally, from a children's development perspective, the ECE stage is a critical period for the formation of their gender identity. Promoting gender equality during this stage can help provide high-quality kindergarten life and education for young children. According to Kohlberg's cognitive development theory, the three stages of young children's gender identity formation are gender identity stage (3-4 years old), gender stability stage (4-5 years old), and gender constancy stage (5-6 years old). Therefore, the ECE stage is an important period for the formation of young children's gender identity and gender expression, and is also considered a particularly important period for addressing inequality issues. Research in the fields of psychology, sociology, neurobiology, and anthropology all indicate that early care and education have significant implications for a range of outcomes related to gender equality, including the formation of gender identity, gender cognition, and emotional concepts. Research has found that 3-year-old children are capable of having gender equality awareness (Deng, 2016), and stereotypes about the intelligence of girls and boys may form as early as six years old (Bian et al., 2017). At the same time, in order to address the gender gap experienced by girls and women in later life, there is evidence to suggest that it is crucial to begin addressing gender biases in the early education stage. Therefore, promoting gender equality during the ECE stage helps create an equal developmental environment for young children and provide them with the same opportunities for development. For example, fully considering the different developmental needs of young children in the design of kindergarten environments and activities, making them more suitable and diverse, and not limiting children's gender roles. At the same time, having a mixed-gender group of teachers can also more effectively demonstrate to young children the values and actions associated with different genders, allowing them to experience and understand what true gender equality is. All of these factors are closely related to the quality of young children's lives in kindergarten and are beneficial to the formation of their gender equality awareness.

2. The Nordic countries: Pioneers in Promoting Gender Equality during the ECE Stage

2.1 Macro Planning: Achieving Gender Mainstreaming in ECE

2.1.1 The concept of Gender Mainstreaming

Gender mainstreaming is a term that emerged in the 1980s and was identified by the United Nations as a global strategy for promoting gender equality. The key idea behind gender mainstreaming is that the needs and interests of women are often ignored or marginalized when formulating economic and social policies. Therefore, there is a need for clear systemic strategies to incorporate gender equality into mainstream social development, decision-making, and grassroots work. In other words, it is necessary to fully reflect the views and experiences of gender equality in the design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of policies and programs in the process of legislation, policy formulation, planning, design, resource allocation, talent cultivation, and organizational construction (Hu & Lian, 2010). This

would enable both genders to benefit equally, driving deep organizational change and building a gender-just society. At the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women, the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action on Women's Rights and Gender Equality established Strategic Objective 8, which aims to improve institutional mechanisms to enhance the status of women. To achieve this objective, governments are required to acknowledge the significance of "incorporating gender perspectives in legislation, public policies, programs, and projects". Gender mainstreaming, as an organizational strategy, has gradually become a consensus in the international community. Its function is to prevent gender issues from being overlooked and ensure that these issues become a priority for organizations. It enables organizations to develop their goals around gender equality.

In the field of education, there is also a growing emphasis on incorporating gender perspectives into mainstream education, integrating gender equality into institutional and legal processes. The UNESCO considers gender equality to be an important component of its vision for fairness and sustainable development. It emphasizes the importance of bringing marginalized gender issues into the core business and major decision-making processes of organizations. In 2003, the UNESCO released its Mid-Term Strategy, which stated that "gender perspectives will be integrated into UNESCO's policies, planning, implementation and evaluation activities in its areas of competence, with the aim of promoting empowerment and achieving gender equality". The UNESCO emphasizes the importance of effectively changing knowledge, perceptions and attitudes in educational organizations to achieve gender mainstreaming in the field of education. In reality, when faced with marginalization or trivialization of gender or women's rights issues, organizations often only make superficial commitments to ensure equality, while deep-rooted inequalities and biases continue to persist. Therefore, UNESCO believes that mainstreaming gender issues in all actions is a profound transformation of the structures and systems that underlie subordinate status and gender inequality. It is the most effective and culturally appropriate means of exposing potential biases that limit women's and men's equal rights and opportunities.

2.1.2 The Nordic Countries Have Integrated Gender Mainstreaming into Policies and Regulations for ECE

The Nordic countries have done a lot of work to achieve gender mainstreaming in the field of education. In 1999, the Amsterdam Treaty gave EU member state governments a binding responsibility to use gender mainstreaming and adopt active policies for gender equality, making gender equality a fundamental principle in all EU activities. In 2007, the EU Council of Ministers adopted a recommendation (CM/Rec(2007)13) on the gender mainstreaming of education, emphasizing the importance of "incorporating gender perspectives into mainstream education at all levels of educational systems and teacher education, in order to achieve de facto gender equality and improve educational quality". All of these provide strong support for achieving gender mainstreaming in the field of education. Building on this, the Nordic countries have enacted gender equality legislation, particularly laws concerning education and school curriculum, which explicitly require gender to be integrated into

mainstream education. Many countries make promoting gender equality an important task for ECE institutions, and promoting gender equality has become one of the national education goals in the early stages.

In Norway, the Gender Equality Act was enacted in 1978, emphasizing that national public institutions should strive to achieve gender equality in all areas of society. The spirit of the Gender Equality Act is reflected in the specific legislation for ECE in Norway, as both the Education Act and Kindergarten Act stipulate that education should actively promote gender equality. In the Kindergarten Act, the first section explicitly states that “kindergartens should promote democracy and equality, and resist all forms of discrimination”; the second section further specifies that kindergartens should “promote equality in the care, upbringing, and learning they provide, taking into account the children’s gender.” Norway’s Kindergarten Framework Plan sets out the content and tasks of all ECE centers in Norway, providing a detailed explanation of gender equality in kindergartens as a social task in ECE: “The education provided by kindergartens should reflect gender equality. Kindergartens should educate children to establish a connection with an equal society and create an equal society. Kindergartens should conduct activities based on the principle of gender equality. Boys and girls should have equal opportunities to be seen and heard, and they should be encouraged to participate in all kindergarten activities together. Staff members must reflect on their attitudes and social expectations towards boys and girls.” (Heikkinen, 2016)

In Sweden, the government has developed a series of policies and laws to promote gender equality in the field of education over the years, fully recognizing the importance of implementing gender equality in kindergarten education. The Education Act of 1985 states that every member of the education system should promote gender equality and actively combat all forms of discriminatory behavior. The Gender Integration Manual in Education, promulgated in 1997, emphasizes the close relationship between gender and education, and states that the education sector should actively promote the achievement of gender equality goals through curriculum design and instructional practices. In 1998, the Swedish National Agency for Education formally issued a nationwide “National Curriculum for early childhood Education”, which was revised in 2011. It clearly stipulates that gender equality education is a basic right of children, and the state needs to fully guarantee the gender equality rights of every child; One of the goals of ECE is to remove stereotypical limitations so that girls and boys have equal opportunities to explore and develop their abilities and talents; Therefore, kindergartens have a responsibility to resist traditional gender patterns and actively promote gender equality in power and opportunities.

2.1.3 Nordic Countries Implement Gender Mainstreaming in ECE Institutions

Gender mainstreaming should not only be reflected in policies and regulations of ECE, but also be implemented in the organization and work of ECE institutions. To achieve this, some Nordic countries have begun to use two promising tools to promote gender mainstreaming in ECE institutions.

2.1.3.1 Gender Equality Planning (GEP)

One of the tools is the Gender Equality Planning, which requires ECE institutions to systematically plan for the promotion of gender equality. Its aim is to make gender equality an integral part of the organizational structure in a profound way, thereby influencing its processes, resources, and the entire environment. Generally speaking, the Gender Equality Planning must include an investigation into the gender equality situation and related issues within the institution, necessary measures to be planned for promoting gender equality, and an explanation of the extent to which previously listed measures have been implemented and corresponding results achieved (Heikkinen, 2016). Special attention should be paid to achieving gender equality in the selection, organization of teaching, and evaluation of learning outcomes, and measures should be taken to prevent and eliminate sexual harassment and gender-based harassment. At the same time, the development and implementation of Gender Equality Planning emphasize the need to cooperate with children, and involve them in the planning process in a way that encourages joint participation between teachers and children. This will help children learn to promote gender equality, and view it as a life skill or citizen competence. Such Gender Equality Planning can be part of the curriculum, or part of other plans in educational institutions. It will provide necessary continuity and sustainability for the actions that educational institutions take to promote gender equality.

Some Nordic countries have already mandated the implementation of Gender Equality Planning in educational institutions. For example, Iceland has stipulated several responsibilities for schools in the Act on Equal Status and Equal Rights of Women and Men, which includes developing action-based Gender Equality Planning and incorporating gender perspectives into all policies and practices in schools. The Icelandic Centre for Gender Equality and the Ministry of Education also carried out a project from 2013 to 2015 based on the Gender Equality Act, which required kindergartens, compulsory schools and music schools to submit action plans for gender equality. The project included guidance on how to develop Gender Equality Planning and organizing workshops for teachers on gender equality education. The results showed that the project was effective. 96% of compulsory schools, 80% of kindergartens, and 74% of music schools in Iceland developed satisfactory action-based Gender Equality Planning, and provided sufficient information on how they meet the requirements set by the Gender Equality Act.

2.1.3.2 Gender Certificate

The Gender certificate is another strategic Nordic tool aimed at raising awareness of gender issues in the field of education, calling for maximum effort to promote gender equality in the education profession. The target audience for the Nordic Gender certificate is professionals in educational institutions, including administrators, teachers, and other educators. However, the certificate is not provided to individual teachers and managers, but requires the entire institution to obtain it through the certification course provided. Through this approach, it is hoped that educational institutions can gain the latest knowledge of gender research, increase sensitivity to gender issues in the field of education,

and follow relevant requirements to implement gender equality concepts in educational practices. The main purpose of establishing this certificate includes: eliminating gender stereotypes and gender-based discrimination through the education sector, accelerating gender equality in the Nordic countries, breaking down barriers, and fully utilizing all existing resources and potential in the Nordic region; increasing awareness and development potential of research-based gender mainstreaming in education; promoting gender mainstreaming and gender equality status through publicity efforts; mutually motivating and ensuring the transfer of research and experience among Nordic countries in integrating a gender perspective into the mainstream of education.

In 2014, the Nordic Council of Ministers initiated the proposal to fully introduce the Nordic Gender certificate, which would be awarded to kindergartens and schools committed to promoting gender equality that meet several specific criteria. However, this initiative did not pass for the time being as some Nordic countries believed that the required cost was too high and difficult to implement. Nevertheless, the idea of setting up a Gender certificate is a good one, as it will contribute to the discussion of qualification standards for educational institutions committed to promoting gender equality. Therefore, this practical tool has been developed at the municipal level in some Nordic countries, such as in the city of Falun, Sweden, where the Gender certificate has been used in kindergartens and schools since 2006.

2.2 Systematic Promotion: Promoting Gender Equality in ECE from Multiple Perspectives

2.2.1 Laying a Foundation: Improving the Gender Balance of the Teaching Workforce

The gender structure of early childhood educators has always been heavily female, which not only affects the physical and mental development of young children, but also hinders the professional and social status of early childhood educators from being elevated (Suo & Wang, 2021). The deep-seated gender imbalance will also continually reproduce traditional gender culture and gender-based division of labor, resulting in deeper gender segregation in the field of ECE. Therefore, the gender imbalance of the teaching workforce has become one of the key issues that attracts increasing attention in the ECE stage. Especially in the past few decades, there has been a significant change in society's attitude towards men participating in the care of children. Men are now seen as important to the development and learning of children; many studies have shown that in early childcare and education, male staff are gradually being welcomed by female colleagues and parents (Peeters et al., 2015).

As early as 1995, the European Commission Network on Childcare identified gender issues as a key concern for early childhood services in Europe, proposing the goal that "20% of childcare workers should be men" in the discussion report 40 Quality Targets for Early Childhood Services regarding the quality of ECE in Europe. Therefore, over the past 20 years, Nordic countries have continuously initiated initiatives to attract more male teachers in the field of ECE, and have taken a series of positive measures to increase the number of male teachers. As a result, Norway has achieved the goal of having 20% male early childhood educators, becoming a global leader in this aspect. These Nordic countries unanimously believe that improving the gender imbalance in the teaching profession will provide a

good starting point for gender equality and diversity work within educational organizations. Achieving better gender balance in the early childhood stage is also seen as an important means of achieving gender equality throughout society, and the percentage of men employed in ECE institutions and schools is one of the indicators for measuring gender equality.

In this process, the Nordic countries have accumulated some beneficial experiences in recruiting more male early childhood educators.

Firstly, policies and financial investment that encourage men to pursue a career as early childhood educators are fundamental guarantees. Compared to other professions or teachers in other stages of education, early childhood educators have lower job attractiveness due to their poor social status and salary. Therefore, national policies targeted at attracting men into the early childhood field make important contributions. For example, since 1997, successive governments in Norway have continuously proposed action plans aimed at promoting gender equality in ECE and other levels of education. Increasing the number of men working in ECE institutions has always been an important goal emphasized in these action plans. Therefore, during the periods of 2001-2003, 2004-2007, 2008-2010, and 2012-2014, Norway launched national recruitment campaigns and government action plans under the theme of “the world’s best job vacancies”, aimed at achieving the goal of having 20% male early childhood educators (Jo, 2018). Moreover, these large-scale recruitment campaigns usually involve certain financial investments. For example, during the 2008-2010 action plan period, each governor of 19 counties received NOK 170,000, which was used to attract more men into the early childhood field through recruitment teams. As one of the countries with the highest salaries for early childhood educators in the world, Norway’s salary for early childhood educators is basically comparable to that of primary school teachers. In addition, Norway is constantly increasing the salary and benefits of early childhood educators, and narrowing the salary gap. For example, from 2002 to 2013, the average monthly salary of different positions in public kindergartens increased by 50-70%, with the highest-paid positions experiencing the largest increase. It is precisely through these recruitment and salary policies that Norway has greatly enhanced the job attractiveness of early childhood educators.

Secondly, pre-service education is key to attracting men into the early childhood field. This is because without qualified men applying for positions at ECE institutions, government recruitment policies will be meaningless. Therefore, Nordic countries are increasingly emphasizing the recruitment of male teacher candidates in ECE through various means and actively reforming the training of male teacher candidates. A Belgian study reviewed all gender-related materials used in childcare courses, and the results showed that ECE training is very unfriendly to men, which is likely to lead to a large number of men dropping out (Peeters, 2007). Therefore, many teacher training institutions have reformed their relevant curriculum designs and established characteristic curriculum models to make these courses more friendly to male teacher candidates. For example, Norwegian kindergartens attach great importance to outdoor activities and games, so teacher training institutions focus on developing outdoor

sports courses, which are particularly popular among male teacher candidates and help to enhance their enthusiasm and confidence in learning. At the same time, in order to reduce the dropout rate of male teacher candidates, Nordic countries also attach importance to providing systematic and continuous support for male teacher candidates during their pre-service education. For example, some universities in Sweden actively cooperate with kindergartens and assign male mentors to male teacher candidates during their teaching internships. These male mentors serve as role models and can enhance the confidence of male teacher candidates in engaging in related educational teaching work in kindergartens (Heikkilä 2019).

Furthermore, the recruitment process can play an important role in attracting more male early childhood educators. Recruitment procedures and publicity can have an impact on the number of male early childhood educators. Many Nordic countries use a “positive discrimination” system during the recruitment process, which allows the priority selection of male candidates among two equally qualified candidates, in order to attract more male job seekers. At the same time, the strategy of “recruiting men with men” is also effective. If a kindergarten already has male teachers or male administrators, it will be easier to recruit more male teachers. Providing more experience for men to work in kindergartens is also beneficial for men to choose a career as early childhood educators. For example, the “Teenage Boys as Play Resources” project launched in Oppland County, Norway in 2009 recruited teenage boys (aged 13-16) to work in kindergartens for a period of time (twice a week, two hours each time, or longer during holidays), and provided male teachers as mentors for them, allowing these boys to experience the work of early childhood educators and guiding them to consider it as a future career choice. Currently, 145 boys have participated in the project, and 64% of them expressed their willingness to work in the ECE field in the future.

Finally, creating a good atmosphere in kindergartens can help retain male early childhood educators. The feminization of kindergarten systems and cultures often hinders the development and retention of male teachers, so Nordic countries attach great importance to building platforms for mutual communication among male teachers, creating a good atmosphere in kindergartens, and supporting and protecting the professional development of male teachers. Many cities and regions have established “male kindergarten networks” and websites for male teachers to communicate and share their experiences. Meanwhile, male teachers may also face “accusations” due to gender stereotypes, such as doubts and mistrust of their motivation for working with young children, which can create an identity crisis and practical difficulties for men in ECE and force them to resign (Børve, 2016). Therefore, kindergartens in Nordic countries are very cautious when recruiting teachers. They not only require a high level of professionalism, but also strictly examine whether applicants have engaged in illegal or inappropriate behavior.

2.2.2 Focus on the Core: Incorporating Gender Equality Education into Teacher Education

Nordic countries have achieved certain results in promoting gender balance in the ECE workforce, with a significant increase in the proportion of male early childhood educators. However, simply increasing

the number of male teachers is only the first step in promoting gender equality. More importantly, it is necessary to enhance teachers' gender equality awareness. Because if early childhood educators lack sensitive gender equality awareness and concepts, it will be difficult for them to respond to the educational needs of children of different genders, and they are also more likely to adhere to traditional gender division of labor and gender role models in kindergartens, teaching children stereotypical gender concepts, thereby hindering the achievement of gender equality. Research shows that gender bias has formed in six-year-old children, and early childhood educators' gender concepts, social role expectations, game arrangements, and guidance can unintentionally reinforce the negative effects of gender stereotypes (Chi, 2021). Therefore, although increasing the number of male early childhood educators is important, some scholars have pointed out that "the real problem is not whether this person is male or female, but the views of teachers on gender identity and gender. In terms of influencing children's social views, teachers' views are more important than their gender." The Recommendation on Gender Mainstreaming in Education (CM/Rec(2007)13) adopted by the EU Ministerial Committee in 2007 specifically emphasized the inclusion of gender issues into mainstream teacher education. Therefore, Nordic countries have made many beneficial attempts to integrate gender equality education into teacher education.

Practice has shown that pre-service teacher education is an effective way to reduce gender stereotypes among prospective teachers. It can not only eliminate gender bias concepts among prospective teachers, but also directly affect their teaching attitudes and behavior. A study in Finland reviewed the current teacher education curriculum and teaching, and found that gender issues were rarely addressed in teacher education courses (Yi & Chen, 2020). The theories and experiences of Finnish and international gender studies were not reflected in the curriculum and teaching, and gender stereotypes were also present in the curriculum, teaching methods, and textbooks. Therefore, Nordic countries have begun to attach importance to reforming pre-service teacher education from the perspective of gender equality. In Denmark, a new reform has been implemented since 2014 to educate and train prospective early childhood educators. The reform has two objectives: one is to prioritize gender equality, and the other is to offer a mandatory independent course to students at the beginning of their education, which forms a separate module called "Gender, Sexuality, and Diversity". This module includes various viewpoints and discourses related to gender, sexuality, gender equality, and different types of family structures. Its core is to enable students to understand the social psychology and sociology knowledge about how personal, social, institutional, and cultural factors construct, create, and replicate human identity, gender, norms, values, and how to act and perform in a diverse culture. This knowledge reveals how gender equality and gender identity are developed, and how gender and gender identity are negotiated and dealt with in teaching practices. Therefore, by systematically learning about gender knowledge in teacher education, prospective early childhood educators can lay the foundation for practicing gender equality in their future educational practices.

Post-service teacher education is also an important way for Nordic countries to cultivate teachers'

gender equality awareness and awaken their gender sensitivity. In 2013, Reykjavik, Iceland established the position of “Equality Project Manager” within the Education and Youth Department to support the implementation of gender equality in kindergartens, compulsory schools, and after-school programs. Starting from April 2015, the project manager held about 30 equality training sessions for early childhood educators. These training sessions provided a broad introduction to gender systems and their manifestations in children and adolescents, and specifically discussed real-life themes such as gender stereotypes and their negative effects, anxiety and negative body image for girls, masculine culture and its impact on academic performance for boys. In such training sessions, teachers have the opportunity to gain in-depth understanding of the latest gender-related research and engage in in-depth discussions on how to apply research findings to educational practices. For example, in a seminar, teachers were asked “how to describe good and neat handwriting?” Some teachers gave similar answers, describing it as “feminine.” This can prompt teachers to reflect on the real-life situation of why boys are increasingly less inclined to have neat handwriting. It is not surprising that in a culture that devalues femininity and “effeminate” behavior, boys may view neat handwriting as shameful. Research by Yang and Warrington also suggests that boys perceive conforming to school culture as feminized, and thus may feel torn between demonstrating masculinity and excelling in school (Yang & Warrington, 2005). It is through such participation and discussion that teachers can gain research-based gender knowledge and reflect on gender issues in the context of education.

At the same time, Nordic countries are increasingly emphasizing the integration of gender discussions and reflections in training, teaching research, and teachers’ self-directed learning in kindergartens. Based on daily practices in kindergartens, this approach can help better address gender issues and improve practices that perpetuate gender inequality. For example, in Sweden, kindergarten managers, teachers, and researchers engage in extensive discussions on gender issues in research groups or study circles. Through this process, they question the gender perspectives in kindergarten and society, rethink seemingly taken-for-granted gender perceptions, clarify blurred gender equality views, and enhance consensus on gender issues, thus promoting gender equality in kindergartens together. In addition, self-reflection by teachers is also crucial because many of their gender stereotypes are often unconscious and implicit. Therefore, kindergartens in Nordic countries use various forms of teaching memos such as videos, photos, and journals to provide teachers with rich reflection materials. This helps teachers deeply reflect from the perspective of gender equality on whether there are implicit gender stereotypes in their daily teaching practices, thus more effectively avoiding potential negative impacts.

2.2.3 Putting It into Practice: Implementing Gender Equality Education in Kindergartens

Gender equality education is considered the most direct and effective way to promote gender equality. It changes gender perceptions and ways of thinking that restrict human development through education, eliminates gender discrimination, and promotes gender equality. Therefore, promoting gender equality education is an important part of Nordic countries’ efforts to promote gender equality in the ECE stage.

Sweden attaches particular importance to children's gender education, and has formed a relatively complete national system of children's gender education from kindergarten to high school. Sweden's government ECE equality delegation has repeatedly emphasized the extreme importance of gender equality education in kindergartens through the drafting of Gender Equality in the Kindergarten and Gendered Kindergarten since 2003. In kindergartens, the focus of gender equality education is not on offering specific courses like other educational stages. Instead, it usually uses a comprehensive teaching approach, subtly incorporating the concept of gender equality into daily educational and living environments in the kindergarten.

On the one hand, Nordic kindergartens attach importance to incorporating gender equality awareness and concepts into daily educational practices. For example, Denmark's "Jordkloden" ECE institution has a teaching method that is based on recognizing gender diversity and gender equality. This institution has a clear gender policy called "Gender, Body and Sexuality Policy" that applies to both educators and children. Jordkloden believes that by providing children with various educational activities regardless of their gender, it can open the door to the world for them. Therefore, this institution opposes any gender-segregated activities and provides detailed guidelines (see Table 1) for implementing teaching methods that promote gender equality and better handling of gender-sensitive educational practices in education.

Table 1. Some Examples of Jordkloden's Gender Equality Educational Guidelines

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- When you start an activity, offer all the children the chance to be part of the activity: especially when it comes to classical gender stereotyped activities, think about potentially including everybody - such as working with beads, cutting/pasting or physically demanding match-type games like soccer, Go-carts etc.
 - Please avoid gendered terms like "girls" and "boys" or gendered slang for these personal pronouns. Instead, say "children", "young people" or something else.
 - Remember to suggest children to play with various kinds of toys, whether it is a boy or a girl: Lego, dolls, kitchen stuff, cars and animals, and pair with playmates that the child is maybe not used to playing with.
 - When singing, reading or telling stories, try to change gender of the characters, in order to open opportunities for ways of apprehending gender identities other than the gender stereotypes. You can also talk to the children about the roles and be critical of stereotypical standards, and open up opportunities for things to be different.
 - Be critical when you hear children and colleagues express themselves stereotypically and try to provide alternatives.
 - When you need to contact the child's home, remember to call on both of the parents, equally.
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On the other hand, Nordic countries are increasingly valuing the role of kindergarten environment in shaping children's gender awareness. The environment is the third teacher for children, and as a unique cultural carrier, it conveys society's and educators' expectations for boys' and girls' behavior. Children constantly learn what it means to be a "boy" or a "girl" from the environment. Therefore, in order to ensure that children are treated equally, have equal opportunities, and develop a sense of equality in kindergarten, it is important to make the indoor and outdoor environments equally attractive to boys and girls, rather than reinforcing their pre-existing traditional gender perceptions (Mo & Wang, 2010). Specifically, kindergartens can review whether there are gender stereotypes in wall designs, game materials and equipment, activity area designs, children's books, etc., and make improvements from a gender equality perspective. For example, due to the influence of traditional gender roles, the dollhouse, which is a main venue for role-playing, has always been seen as a girl's territory and is more attractive to girls. This phenomenon conveys the traditional gender division of labor in which women are responsible for activities in the family, which is not conducive to children making non-traditional choices. In fact, in modern society, more and more fathers are participating in family activities, and men can also cook and take care of children at home. Therefore, we should enhance the appeal of the dollhouse area to boys by adding materials and equipment, encourage boys and girls to experience different role divisions, and achieve comprehensive development.

3. Conclusion

Gender equality is a core concept for social development in Nordic countries. Nordic countries consider promoting gender equality and diversity as a basic civic skill, and promoting gender equality in the ECE stage is an important part of social fairness and justice. Nordic countries are at the forefront of exploring gender equality in the ECE field, providing important insights for promoting gender equality globally.

Firstly, gender issues in the ECE stage should be given importance, and promoting gender equality should be considered an important aspect of ECE development. Gender issues in the ECE field often reflect the microcosm of social gender inequality. A gender-equal kindergarten can undoubtedly become a model for a more gender-equal society. Promoting gender equality in the ECE stage is helpful in addressing gender imbalance in the entire labor market, reconstructing the gender system and culture of the kindergarten, enhancing the professionalism and social status of early childhood educators, and providing higher quality kindergarten education for children. Therefore, gender equality should become one of the key issues that ECE around the world needs to address for further development.

Secondly, gender equality should become the mainstream of ECE. Gender mainstreaming is a global organizational strategy for promoting gender equality, aiming to make gender equality an integral part of mainstream social development, decision-making, and basic work. Specifically for China, as one of the first 49 governments to commit to gender mainstreaming, there has been some progress in gender mainstreaming, and there is also a focus on implementing gender equality concepts in education. The

Outline for the Development of Chinese Women (2021-2030) continued to propose the goal of “fully implementing the basic state policy of gender equality in education work” in 2021, requiring the “implementation of the basic state policy of gender equality into the formulation, revision, implementation, and evaluation of education laws, regulations, policies, and plans, as well as into various educational contents, teaching processes, and school management at all levels.” Under the promotion of the National Working Committee on Children and Women under the State Council, some primary and secondary schools in China have begun to explore the incorporation of gender equality concepts in curriculum standards and teaching processes. However, in the ECE stage, there have been relatively few explorations in this regard, and gender equality issues still remain on the periphery and have not yet become an important issue for the development of ECE. Therefore, it is necessary to attach importance to achieving gender mainstreaming in ECE, integrate gender equality concepts into ECE policies and regulations, and make promoting gender equality an important task for the development of ECE institutions.

Finally, it is necessary to start from multiple perspectives and systematically promote the process of gender equality in the ECE stage. China has also made some positive attempts to promote gender equality in the ECE stage, such as the policy in Jiangsu Province since 2010 to provide free teacher training for male ECE students, which attracts and encourages excellent males to choose ECE as their profession, thereby improving the gender imbalance issue in the ECE teaching staff. However, the gender issues and the realization of gender equality in the ECE field are complex and require systematic promotion from multiple perspectives. For China, it is also important to realize the importance of gender equality awareness and concepts among teachers, and to incorporate gender equality content into curriculum design and teaching at teacher training colleges and in various levels of teacher training programs, and to include gender equality education in the teacher education system. At the same time, it is also necessary to fully realize the importance of integrating gender equality concepts into daily education and teaching activities and environment in kindergartens, and to carry out gender equality education, so that gender equality can truly be implemented in kindergartens.

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