RESEARCH REPORT

Gender practices and play-based learning for preschool children in mountainous areas of Quang Nam and Quang Ngai provinces

Gender-responsive teaching and learning in the early years (GENTLE)
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**Challenge**
In central provinces of Vietnam, inequalities due to early gender socialization are among the most persisting equity issues, affecting girls and boys. Gender stereotypes start being formed at the age of 3 to 5 years and have an impact on life-course outcomes. Negative gender stereotypes shaped at a young age are closely linked to gender-based violence in later life.

**Goal**
3-5-year-old girls and boys in central Vietnam experience gender-responsive play-based learning in preschool and at home, contributing to the development of positive identities, relationships and self-esteem, which enable them to have healthy and joyful lives free from gender-based violence.

**Approach**
The project focuses on a positive development of children’s gender identity. It innovatively prevents gender based violence by working on the roots of the problem. Early intervention, at a time when children’s brains and social identities are developing rapidly, directly impacts on prevention of gender-based violence. Preschools will challenge social and gender norms, create new rules, and support children in adopting new, more equitable attitudes and behaviours.
The project focuses on teachers and school leaders capacity development and the strengthening of processes and practices within and around the school.
Its sensitization and communication campaign will ensure a better understanding of gender issues at the preschool.

**Partners**
- CGFED (Research Center for Gender, Family and Environment in Development)

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**Location**
Provinces of Quang nam and Quang Ngai
(15 districts)

**Timing**
June 2018—May 2021

**Budget**
€ 535,320
I. Introduction to the research

Objectives of the research

- Identify gender stereotype-based practices in preschools and their causes
- Learn about how play-based learning is understood and applied in early childhood education.
- Identify effective and sustainable channels for coordination between families and preschools

Research methods and technique for information collection

- Desk review
- Direct observation
- In-depth individual review
- Group discussion (father and mother groups)

Field sites and research participants

- Field sites: Tien Phuoc, Phuoc Son and Hiep Duc in Quang Nam; Minh Long and Son Ha in Quang Ngai
- Research participants:
  - Class observation: 20
  - In-depth interview:
    - Bureau of Education and Training’s staffs: 5 (BOET)
    - School leaders: 10
    - Teachers: 20
  - Group discussion: 160
II. Key findings

1. Play-based learning

1.1. What is play-based learning
Learning through play is for children to control their activities and give ideas during play; help enhance children’s wellbeing and involvement in the learning process, help children learn many skills and nurture their creativity and imagination. 5 characteristics:

- Learning through play is joyful.
- Learning through play is meaningful.
- Learning through play is actively engaging.
- Learning through play is iterative.
- Learning through play is socially interactive.

1.2. Knowledge of play-based learning
Most of the preschool leaders and teachers said:

- Learning through play is appropriate and effective for children
- Help the learning process take place naturally and effectively
- Enhance children’s involvement and interaction

All preschool leader and teacher lack of intensive training and documentation => there are different understandings:

- Children learn through all activities but most through playing
- Or Children learn mainly through learning activities

1.3. The application of play-based learning

- Learning through play is joyful
  - Teachers apply many attractive methods / listen to children to adjust the appropriate activities
  - Less interactive activities make children less excited

- Learning through play is meaningful
  - Corner activities help children explore and experience
  - Some teachers force children must follow their guide

- Learning through play is actively engaging
  - Children actively participate in physical activities, play freely, play outdoors, ...
  - Many lessons / learning activities have not attracted the focus of children

- Learning through play is iterative
  - Children explore a variety of used toys / can choose their interesting activities by themselves
  - Some teachers stereotyped in organizing activities

- Learning through play is socially interactive
  - Some activities are designed in the form of learning and play, children interact well and excited
  - Some teachers focus on providing knowledge and lack of interaction
2. Gender issues

2.1. Gender awareness
- Gender awareness of BOET’s staffs, preschool leaders, teachers:
  - Most of them still do not really understand this concept. Some teachers/ school leaders could tell the basic definition of sex and gender they do not have an in-depth understanding of the difference between gender and sex. Much of this knowledge is from books and the Internet.
  - Many teachers believe that the differences between men and women are innate
  - All teachers and school leaders shared that they had never attended any specific training on gender. Sex/ gender knowledge was integrated into annual professional training or capacity building activities, but the content is very limited: about maintaining children’s hygiene, preventing child violence and sexual abuse and telling children not to approach strangers
- Gender awareness of parents:
  - All parents believe that they have to teach their children appropriate manners following the traditions like boys do not cry and boys are strong. This is not only the innate nature of children, but also the cultural tradition
  - Misunderstanding about “Transgender concept”: If they do not teach their children so, they worry that their children will be becoming “transgender”
  - They had learned from their grandparents, as well as in books and newspaper
  \[ \Rightarrow \] Therefore, if the teacher comments on the child's inappropriate characteristic/behaviour that is not gender-specific and requires adjustment, all parents said they will work with the teacher to help change their child.

2.2. Gender practices

2.2.1. Legal policies/ teaching materials
- Legal policies: there is the Gender Equality Law / gender equality action plan of the education sector ... however
  - The policies do not include explicit references to pre-school context
  - Does not require gender knowledge / gender equality for teacher in preschool
  - There is no training program to improve gender knowledge for teacher in preschool
- Guidelines: The development standard of 5 years old children includes indicator 28 stating children's behaviour must be in line with the gender stereotypes related to their sex. The document has an official status and includes an extensive description of gender stereotypes that teachers are expected to reinforce.
  - Teaching materials: show stereotypes about gender roles in the family and career orientation in guidebooks, images, materials, ...

2.2.2. Gender-related practices in classroom activities
- Calling: Call girls more gently than boys. Because of gender characteristics that girls prefer sweetness while boys prefer strength
- Clothes: Boys have short hair and wear t-shirts with shorts. Girls have long hair and wear dresses and skirts
- Labor divide: Boys often carry tables, and girls help teachers sweep the class
- Model: the boys are priority becoming model in exercise time. Call to speak: “The girls pay more attention and follow teacher's instructions better, so I often invite them to demonstrate first to the draw the boys' attention”
2.2.3. Corner activities sessions

- Many gender issues manifested through the children’s areas and ways of playing at the construction and role-play corner. Almost all participants in role-play corner are girls and cooking, playing with dolls or role-play a teacher were popular activities. Boys were also engaged in this corner, but their participation depended on specific topics. Boys mainly play in construction corner.

- Most of the teachers provided orientation for children because they considered that appropriate to the development and gender of the children "If the girls love construction, I will tell them 'Girls do not have strength, so this is not suitable for you. Boys should take this kind of job".

2.2.4. Gender practices of parents

- Child-care:
  - A majority of parents agree that mothers uphold the duty of childcare because fathers are busy working in the fields while mothers have more free time. Besides, mothers are gentler and naturally capable of taking care of children.
  - All the parents said that they would buy shorts, trousers, toy cars, balls and marbles for boys. Likewise, girls should wear princess’s dresses; play with dolls and makeup stuff.

- Parenting:
  - The teaching and learning activities clearly show the stereotypes of boys and girls in the family and society. Girls are taught to be gentle and tender while boys must be strong and not cry. Children are also expected to follow popular gender-based careers such as sales and teacher for girls and doctor and policeman for boys.

2.3. Violence

In 10 out of 20 classes, boys have been observed to be more aggressive, naughty and fighting for more toys than girls. The teachers expressed that “Girls are gentle, so they use words to negotiate, boys are strong so sometimes use limbs”.

Practical activities which can bring negative impact to children behaviors:

- Observations show that teachers still have gender bias - the little girl is asked to apologize; the boy is asked to go away and not bother friends.
- Parents spontaneously report boys toys tend to be more violent. At the same time boys often get serious penalties (kneeling, whip) when making mistakes.

Cause: the formation of afore-shared viewpoints in different ways of parenting and childcare for boys and girls were rooted in the culture. Teachers and school leaders are often convinced raising children in accordance to traditional gender patterns is good and consistent with traditional culture.

2.4. Forms of contact and effectiveness of school-parents collaboration

Forms of contact:

- Parent meetings: three times a year
- Face-to-face meeting when picking up children
- Meeting parents through events like working sessions, making toys for children, performing arts, and children’s programs.
• Make phone calls in case of sudden events such as children’s absence from school or children getting sick
• Bulletin: bulletins are placed in front of each classroom,
• Contact notebook: Each child is given a contact notebook in which their learning and health records are kept and informed to parents once a month

*Face-to-face meetings are considered to be the most effective means by both the teachers and the parents. Interviews however reveal that fathers seldom bring or pick-up their children because they are busy working.*

Mothers and grandmothers often took their children to school, picked them home and talked to their teachers

• Mothers and fathers had different characteristics. Mothers were more gentle and closer to the child while fathers didn’t express much of themselves although they also cared about the child
• Fathers were caught up in their work because they were main labors of the family. They had to leave home early to go work in the fields.

2.5. Expectations

• Expectations of BOET’s staffs, preschool leaders and teachers:
  ◦ Capacity building: Improving knowledge and access to gender-specific materials; provide gender training for teachers/ school leaders; have field trips to schools which had experience and good practices in gender integration into teaching
  ◦ Sharing of this knowledge should be made available to parents as the education of children requires joint actions of both parties
• Expectations of parents: “*It would be great if there is a training course on parenting so that I can know more about it. I am able to attend one-day training. And it will also be great if teachers can give parents some leaflets and materials on child education. Sometimes when my child asks me questions at home about what he learns at school, I do not know how to answer.*”

III. Recommendations

• Enhancing sex and gender awareness, the negative impact of gender stereotypes, gender-based violence and play-based learning for preschool leaders, teachers, parents.
• Building the toolkit that guides teachers, preschool leaders, parent how to integrate gender/ gender sensitivity, play-based learning into lessons, classroom activities as well as parenting children.
• BOET, DOET (Department of Education and Training) should have mechanism to support, monitor/ supervise the mainstreaming of gender sensitivity, play-based learning in teaching activities, daily activities and playing activities for children.
• Take measures to attract the participation of men / fathers in child care, interaction with teachers
• Diversifying learning materials, decorating classrooms with gender mainstreaming elements
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