



Investing in pre-primary education workforce development for gender equality

Key findings

- **Pre-primary teachers play a crucial role in determining how the education system contributes to gender equality.** Using gender-transformative approaches to inform teacher recruitment, training and retention measures is necessary to ensure a quality workforce that promotes gender-transformative learning environments.
- **Pre-service and in-service training for teachers must include gender-transformative pedagogy.** Programmes should provide opportunities for the pre-primary workforce to reflect on their own gender biases and receive continuous support in the classroom and school.
- **The pre-primary education is a highly feminized subsector.** Teacher recruitment strategies should be oriented to attracting male teachers for a more gender-balanced pre-primary education workforce. Gendered biases in allocation of leadership roles should be proactively challenged and both men and women should be supported to play non-stereotypical roles.
- **Employment conditions of the pre-primary education workforce should be improved.** Measures such as salary increases, accredited training, continuous professional development, and established career pathways can make the subsector more attractive to all candidates but especially women who constitute more than 90 per cent of the pre-primary workforce globally.

Context

The teaching workforce is at the heart of quality pre-primary education services. Pre-primary teachers play a crucial role in determining the interactive environment of early learning settings and how the education system contributes to gender equality. Therefore, workforce development strategies for the recruitment, training and retention of teachers and other personnel are key to ensuring that pre-primary school staff have the necessary competencies and support to promote children's holistic development and learning in a gender-transformative environment.¹

What do we know?

Teachers' actions can influence children's learning experiences and their personal gendered views and behaviours. Evidence from 11 Asian countries suggests that teachers can hold stereotypical attitudes towards boys' and girls' achievements. They are more likely to attribute academic achievement in girls to dedicated work, in contrast to inherent ability in boys.² Evidence from 3–5-year-olds in the United States also shows that, in classrooms where teachers used gendered language to refer to students, materials and activities, the children increased gender stereotyping and reduced play with the opposite sex.³

Providing teachers with training in gender-transformative pedagogy improves learning processes in school, particularly for girls. Evidence from African countries shows that the implementation of gender sensitivity training and gender-responsive pedagogy enhanced girls' self-esteem as teachers brought gender awareness to the classroom and responded to the specific needs of students.⁴

Pre-primary education is a highly feminized subsector. 94 per cent of pre-primary teachers globally are female.⁷ This uneven recruitment pattern is a significant issue. It not only hinders the provision of stimulating learning environments that can counteract traditional gender roles, but can also perpetuate itself, through the effect of role models, by preventing boys from entering the teaching profession in countries with smaller proportions of male teachers.^{8,9}

Pre-primary education often attracts lower salaries and receives fewer benefits than other education subsectors. Studies suggest that feminized occupations tend to attract a wage penalty – paying less than other occupations even after considering education levels and previous professional experience.^{5,6}

What should we do?

- **Improve employment conditions and professionalization of the pre-primary workforce on a system-wide scale.** This includes implementing measures such as salary increases and attractive non-monetary incentives like continuous professional development, the establishment of accredited qualifications and career pathways for qualified and non-qualified workers, and the adoption of occupational safety and health policies specific to pre-primary schools.
- **Incorporate gender-transformative pedagogy in teacher pre-service and in-service training programmes.** These initiatives should allow teachers to reflect on their own gender beliefs, biases and use of gendered language. In-service training programmes should include follow-ups and continuous support in the classroom and school environment through observation of current practices, to achieve a sustained implementation of gender-transformative pedagogy.
- **Implement strategies for a more gender-balanced pre-primary teacher recruitment process that addresses the lack of male teachers in the subsector.** These can include communication campaigns, provision of gender-responsive vocational and career advice, and establishment of male teacher networks to attract more men to the caring professions. Occupations are not inherently gendered, but this is not often modelled in the education sector. Efforts to achieve gender balance in pre-primary should therefore take place alongside approaches to address women's under-representation in other parts of the education system, including in school leadership and in science, mathematics and secondary teaching in many countries.

What are some examples of good practice?

Factors driving gender biases and stereotypes vary across countries. It is therefore necessary to develop measures that respond to the needs of teachers and other staff in each particular context. Some examples of how such strategies strive for gender equality through the pre-primary education workforce are presented in Box 1.

Box 1. Examples of workforce development strategies for gender equality



Employment conditions

Ecuador

In 2012, the Ecuadorian government rolled out training for childcare volunteers – usually women from the community – who received a stipend below the minimum wage. The training allowed them to obtain a technical degree and, after three years of part-time study, they began receiving the minimum wage and full social security benefits.¹²



Recruitment

Norway

Since 2001, four National Education Action Plans included measures for recruiting more men in pre-primary education. These measures included establishing a network for 'Men in Kindergarten'. The Government increased the number of male teachers in pre-primary education from 2,210 in 2000 to 6,716 in 2013.¹³



Training

South Africa, Viet Nam and Zambia

The Gender-Responsive Pedagogy in Early Childhood Education (GRP4ECE) toolkit, developed by the international non-profit organization VVOB and the Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWE), provides pre-primary education teachers and school leaders with practical instruments to reflect on their own gender biases and beliefs when interacting with children. The toolkit has been piloted as a capacity-building approach in South Africa, Viet Nam and Zambia.¹⁰ An impact study in South Africa found that teachers who received GRP4ECE training encouraged all children, regardless of gender, to interact with a wide variety of toys and learning materials in the classroom.¹¹

Source: World map vector from stock.adobe.com

Note: The designations employed in this publication and the presentation of the material do not imply on the part of UNICEF the expression of any opinion whatsoever concerning the legal status of any country or territory, or of its authorities or the delimitations of its frontiers.

What are the remaining evidence gaps?

Evidence on the coverage of gender-transformative pedagogy in pre-service teacher training programmes. This evidence would help to identify how far new teachers are introduced to general gender-related concepts, as well as to tools and guidelines to apply gender-transformative pedagogy in their own practice. Data could be used to ensure that in-service training programmes address any identified gaps.

Evidence on the root causes of gender imbalance in the pre-primary education workforce within different contexts. This could help to develop context-specific strategies that respond to the diverse economic, social, historical and cultural barriers preventing men from entering the pre-primary education system.

Evidence on women's participation in preschool leadership. Studies from low- and middle-income countries show a positive association between female school leaders and student outcomes in primary school.¹⁴ There is a significant data and knowledge gap regarding whether women are actually occupying these leadership positions at the pre-primary education level.

Further reading

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