

THE REPRESENTATION OF GENDER IDEOLOGY IN THE EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION TEACHER'S HANDBOOK

A REPRESENTAÇÃO DA IDEOLOGIA DE GÊNERO NO MANUAL DO PROFESSOR DE EDUCAÇÃO INFANTIL

Article received on: 8/29/2025

Article accepted on: 11/28/2025

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The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest

Abstract

Books that are regularly read shape readers' thinking and views. This study aims to critique and uncover how gender ideology is constructed in The Early Childhood Education Teacher's Handbook (ECETH) by (1) identifying gender ideology as a societal discourse; (2) explaining ideological co-existence in the form of naturalisation and gender resistance; and (3) formulating asymmetric gender progressivism. This study adopted a mixed-methods approach, supported by qualitative descriptive methods. Data were obtained from six books and a completed questionnaire. Data analysis was conducted using critical discourse analysis and NVi-vo. The results show that gender ideology is not a stable or fixed worldview but rather a discursive formation shaped by social contingencies that depend on professional, locally embedded institutional structures, policies, and practices. Gender is naturalized in terms that do not constitute an explicit challenge to gender equality, but rather an implicit refinement process that maintains existing hierarchies while allowing some room for modification. Asymmetric gender progressivism helps explain why gender-inclusive language and imagery

Resumo

Os livros que são lidos regularmente moldam o pensamento e as opiniões dos leitores. Este estudo tem como objetivo criticar e revelar como a ideologia de gênero é construída no Manual do Professor de Educação Infantil (ECETH) (1) identificando a ideologia de gênero como um discurso social; (2) explicando a coexistência ideológica na forma de naturalização e resistência de gênero; e (3) formulando o progressismo de gênero assimétrico.

Este estudo adotou uma abordagem de métodos mistos, apoiada por métodos descritivos qualitativos. Os dados foram obtidos a partir de seis livros e um questionário preenchido. A análise dos dados foi realizada utilizando a análise crítica do discurso e o NVi-vo. Os resultados mostram que a ideologia de gênero não é uma visão de mundo estável ou fixa, mas sim uma formação discursiva moldada por contingências sociais que dependem de estruturas institucionais, políticas e práticas profissionais e localmente enraizadas. O gênero é naturalizado em termos que não constituem um desafio explícito à igualdade de gênero, mas sim um processo implícito de refinamento que mantém as hierarquias existentes, ao mesmo



coexist with largely intact inequality. This is a crucial realization in the debate about changing gender norms and in the endeavor to develop genuinely inclusive pedagogical resources.

Keywords: Gender. Ideology. Asymmetric Gender Progressivism. Early-Childhood-Education Teacher's Handbook.

tempo em que permite alguma margem para modificações. O progressismo de gênero assimétrico ajuda a explicar por que a linguagem e as imagens inclusivas de gênero coexistem com uma desigualdade amplamente intacta. Essa é uma constatação crucial no debate sobre a mudança das normas de gênero e no esforço para desenvolver recursos pedagógicos genuinamente inclusivos.

Palavras-chave: Gênero. Ideologia. Progressismo de gênero assimétrico. Manual do professor de educação infantil.

1 INTRODUCTION

In recent years, there has been considerable interest in gender equality in school textbooks. Highlighting this issue can inspire the audience to recognize their role in shaping perceptions, emphasizing the importance of gender representation in textbooks and its influence on learners' views (Mustapha & Mills, 2015).

Equity, the dominance of an ideology, and injustice are carried out and operated through discourse. Critical Discourse Analysis (AWK) studies these things represented in various forms of language choices contained in discourse. Ideology is expressed through multiple forms of language choice in the discourse. Ideology is a central concept in CDA (the way of thinking of a person or group), literary discourse is a form of ideology or a reflection of a particular ideology. The dominant group constructs this ideology to reproduce and legitimise its dominance (Van Dijk, 2015). One strategy is to raise public awareness that dominance is accepted and considered a given. Ideology, in this case, is inherently social, and AWK sees discourse as a form of social practice (Fairclough, 2023).

Early childhood (0-6 years) is a critical period for the formation of self-concept and identity, during which children actively begin to understand and internalize gender concepts through interactions with their immediate environment, including the media and learning materials. Early Childhood Education (ECE) is a preschool program intended for children from birth to age six that aims to support their physical and spiritual growth and development of children as they enter elementary school (Jackson & Gee, 2005). In the context of formal education, Early Childhood Education Teachers (ECETs) play a highly influential role as significant others.

Field phenomena show that gender ideology stereotypes are still widely intertwined in children's teaching materials. Previous studies (Soelistyarini, 2013; Nafi'ah et al., 2018) have revealed that children's storybooks and textbooks often depict men in active, public, and rational roles, while women are depicted in domestic, passive, and emotional roles.

Most previous critical studies have focused more on children's reading books or student textbooks, while teacher handbooks have received little in-depth analysis. The Early Childhood Education Teacher Handbook (ECETH) serves as a basis for teachers to engage and communicate with ECETs (Pianta & Sheridan, 2015; Couse & Recchia, 2016). Teacher handbooks are among the main pedagogical tools that guide teaching practices, provide a framework for activities, and often, unconsciously, convey cultural and ideological messages about gender through the visual representations and language they contain. Incorporating gender-sensitive pedagogical ideology into existing curriculum frameworks can empower teachers and policymakers to challenge biases and promote representations that support holistic development, aligned with SDGs 4 and 5.

The ECETH is intended primarily for teachers and is passed on to children. Children's thinking is in the concrete-operational stage, a period in which their mental activity is focused on real objects or events they experience. Children in early childhood education have characteristics that differ from those of other children. They like to play, move, work in groups, and feel or do things directly (Desmita, 2009; Nuryanti, 2009). This aligns with the theory of multiple intelligences (Gardner, 2000), particularly children's verbal-linguistic intelligence.

Research on ECE children (4-5 years old) in Canadian preschool classes aimed to help children understand social issues, including gender equality. The researcher listened carefully to the ECE students, who raised social and cultural issues about daily life that would be beneficial to explore in the curriculum. The researcher demonstrated a good practice when children raised the issue of their exclusion at the school's annual cultural event (Vasquez, 2017). The other study examined 5- to 8-year-olds from multi-ethnic backgrounds in Australian urban schools regarding the teaching of critical reading. The researcher illustrates several activities that help children work through the construction of gender identity in various texts, including informational and children's literature. Through a series of fun classes and activities based on the Mother's Day catalogue, the researcher guided children in critiquing gender constructs and

consumerism (O'Brien et al., 2025). Children "read" their social world critically, through a creative pedagogy that allows them to talk, read, and create their own texts.

Social institutions, such as family, school, the workplace, and the media, teach us that girls should act in specific ways, such as being caring, while boys should act in different ways, such as being strong and independent. These representations of boys and girls can be brought into sharp focus in classrooms. They can be part of 'talk about the text', so that even the most stereotypical image can, in fact, be the foundation for consciousness-raising discussions around gender roles (Holmes & Romeo, 2013).

Many studies have indicated that language textbooks are ideology-biased, representing men in relation to occupations and public and social life, portraying them as decision-makers in the public sphere (Fennell & Arnot, 2008; Ikawati, 2007; Mustapha & Mills, 2015). In contrast, women were rendered invisible or represented in secondary roles within the private sphere or in far fewer numbers within the public sphere (Witt, 2001; Artini et al., 2024).

Textbook studies on gender construction have provided content and linguistic analyses of written discourse and illustrations (Yang, 2014). This study investigated sexist language, male primacy, and gender stereotypes.

The contributions of this research are multidimensional. Similarly, the results of this study enrich the literature by prioritising the context of ECE teachers. Methodologically, this study introduced a series of indicator-based measures that can be replicated across other teacher handbooks. These findings will strengthen or potentially revise the framework for preparing teacher books using empirical evidence. In this way, this research contributes not only to expanding scientific knowledge on gender equality but also to advancing theoretical development in the broader ECE landscape.

This study aims to critique and uncover how gender ideology is constructed in the ECETH through a critical discourse analysis, drawing on public opinion. More specifically, this study is designed to: (1) identify gender ideology as a societal discourse; (2) explain ideological coexistence in the form of naturalisation and gender resistance; and (3) formulate asymmetric gender progressivism.

2 METHODOLOGY

Data collection by examining the six ECETHs studied using documentation methods (Moleong, 2007). In addition, simple observations and a questionnaire were conducted with 88 respondents aged 18 to 67 years (ECET, lecturers, caregivers, university students, media and creative professionals, and government/private-sector professionals). Brief interviews are used to provide deeper contextual insights, especially regarding the acceptance of books related to gender equality. The questionnaire consists of ten closed-ended questions (there is a choice of answers) related to the images and text contained in the book and one open-ended question on the **appropriate** way to teach/introduce gender equality to children.

The primary data come from the revised edition of ECETH (Emancipation Learning Curriculum, Early Childhood Education Level), available at <https://buku.kemdikbud.go.id/katalog/buku-kurikulum-merdeka>.

Here is the number (I—VI) and identity of the book.

1. I. ECETH on Identity (144 pages)
2. II. ECETH on Religious Values and Ethics (144 pages)
3. III. ECETH on Learning for the Foundation Phase (152 pages)
4. IV. ECETH on the Pancasila Student Project (160 pages)
5. V. ECETH on the Basics of Literacy, Mathematics, Science, Technology, Engineering, and Art (168 pages)
6. VI. ECETH on Book-Based Learning and Play (152 pages)

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach, supported by qualitative descriptive methods (Haq, 2015; Thomann et al., 2022). The research objective guided the identification and mapping of patterns of gender representation in ECETH's ideological elements. The quantitative approach allows systematic measurement of many indicators. At the same time, the qualitative descriptive component serves as a form of triangulation, enriching the interpretation of findings through questionnaires by critical discourse analysis (Van Dijk, 2015) and NVivo analysis. This combination is considered the most suitable for capturing the complexity of gender ideology in the book on ECETH.

3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Language representation

In the context of children, the people closest to gender markers are parents. In this teacher's handbook, words that refer to gender are only found in the words *ibu* 'mother/ladies', *bapak* 'father/gentleman', *ayah* 'father', *papa* 'father', *mama* 'mother', *bunda* 'mother', *nenek* 'grandmother', dan *kakek* 'grandfather. In addition, there are indeed names that refer to female or male. In ECETH, three terms for mother/ladies are known: *ibu*, *bunda*, and *mama*. For the father/gentleman, there are three terms: *ayah*, *bapak*, *papa*. In addition to parents as the closest people to children, there are also *nenek kakek* 'grandparents. It is just that the number of vocabularies for *nenek* 'female grandparents' and *kakek* 'male grandparents' is not much and does not spread to all books. Therefore, it is not written in the table. The following is Table 1, which shows the number of mentions of the vocabulary.

Table 1

Number of vocabularies related to females and males

Book	<i>ibu</i> 'ladies'	<i>bunda</i> 'mother'	<i>mama</i> 'mother'	<i>ayah</i> 'father'	<i>bapak</i> 'gentleman'	<i>papa</i> 'father'
I	28	2	2	3	5	0
II	44	2	1	3	45	2
III	24	5	2	9	13	0
IV	10	4	0	4	3	0
V	68	0	2	4	68	1
VI	24	0	0	10	15	0
Total	198	13	7	33	149	3

Based on Table 1, the word *ibu* 'mother/ladies' (198) is more dominant than *bapak* 'father/gentlemen' (149). The use of the word *ibu* in four books (I, II, III, IV) was recorded, and the total occurrences of the female terms-*ibu*, *bunda*, and *mama*-amounted to 218. Calculating the average, this results in approximately 36 words per book, providing a quantitative basis for analyzing language emphasis across texts. The word *ayah* 'father' (33) is used evenly in all books. The word *papa* (3) is used only in books II and V with low frequency. The dominant one is the word *bapak* 'father/gentleman' (149).

The words referring to the male lemma, namely *ayah*, *bapak*, and *papa*, totaled 185, averaging 31 words per book

Based on the questionnaire, including ECE teachers, teachers argue that the word *ibu* ‘ladies) appears more often because most ECE teachers are women. Recognising this dominance can foster appreciation for the role of gender in language, which is vital for educators’ awareness and perceptions. These results reinforce previous research indicating that language textbooks are biased, representing men in relation to occupations and public and social life (Fennell & Arnot, 2008; Mustapha & Mills, 2015). Table 2 shows the mention of gender-related sequences in the phrase as follows.

Table 2

Number of phrases gender-related sequence mentions

Book	Father/ Mother	Ladies/ Gentlemen	Gentlemen/ Ladies	Gentlemen and Ladies	Teacher (female)	Teacher (male)
I	0	1	1	0	18	6
II	1	1	44	11	5	0
III	0	0	5	0	0	0
IV	0	0	3	0	21	2
V	0	0	48	0	5	0
VI	0	7	0	0	1	0
Total	1	9	112	11	50	8

Highlight the variation in male dominance over female in naming practices across different Regions or Communities to emphasize cultural diversity and deepen understanding of gendered language patterns in educational materials. Table 2 shows that the mention of *ibu* ‘ladies’ before *bapak* ‘gentlemen’ is found in 3 books (I, II, VI). In the same book, the order can be reversed with *bapak* ‘gentlemen’ first, followed by *ibu* ‘ladies’ (books I and II). Book VI consistently uses the order of *ibu* ‘ladies’ first before *bapak* ‘gentlemen’. The order that is commonly used (many) in the five books is *bapak* ‘gentlemen’ before *ibu* ‘ladies’ (books I-V), with high frequency. In addition, the mention of *Bapak/Ibu* ‘Gentlemen/Ladies’ is also intertwined with the mention of *Bapak dan Ibu* ‘Gentlemen and Ladies’ (there is a word “and”) found in one book, namely book II. On the other hand, it was also found that the mention of *Ibu Guru* or *Bu Guru*’s greetings for female teacher’ (50) was more than that of *Bapak/Pak Guru*’s greetings for male teacher’ (8). The ‘*Bapak/Pak Guru*’s greeting for male teachers is mentioned in only two of the teachers’ books: Book 1 and Book IV. It implies that women dominate the field of ECE teaching.

Only 16 respondents chose the greeting “*Ibu/Bapak*”. The preference for addressing men first reflects societal customs. Analyzing how these greeting patterns influence gender roles and interactions in ECE settings can deepen understanding of cultural practices in education. These findings support previous research indicating that greeting men before women is standard (Lee & Collins, 2015).

Some gender-biased sentences appear in the book. In Table 3, recognizing these biases can help the audience feel the importance of addressing gender stereotypes in educational content.

3.2 Gender ideology across professional backgrounds: between naturalisation and resistance

To examine how gender ideology is articulated across different social positions, a matrix coding query was conducted by intersecting respondents' professional backgrounds with the dominant ideological nodes generated through NVivo analysis. By comparing gender ideology across different professions, we show that it does not function uniformly; rather, it is conditioned by the degrees of normalisation, reflexivity, and resistance to which individual respondents are subject as a function of their institutional roles and discursive repertoires.

Based on the evidence presented in the previous section, Table 3 shows that early childhood teachers (PAUD educators) predominantly exhibit a hybrid ideological pattern that combines the naturalisation of gendered preferences with the emergence of new forms of resistance. Although gendered toys are frequently labelled as “normal” or developmentally appropriate, tensions emerge as many educators simultaneously voice the importance of flexibility, equal access, and pedagogical action. This ambivalence points to reflective negotiation rather than the rejection of the dominant gender regime as an outcome of professional exposure to early childhood education.

Conversely, lecturers adopt a predominantly critical–resistive stance. Responses evidenced overt critiques of gender bias, heightened sensitivity to the hidden curriculum, and a particular focus on the ideological implications of visual and textual representations. Instead of presenting gendered preferences as a matter of personal choice, the lecturers in the courses we observed located preferences within wider socio-cultural and educational structures, making gender ideology a question of teaching ethics, not of individual taste.

The discourse of caregivers as *Bunda PAUD* tends to be more normative–naturalised. Their answers often draw on more commonsense assumptions that normalise gendered toy tendencies as innate, natural, or obvious. For this group, coding is primarily focused on the nodes' Naturalisation of Stereotype' and 'Gendered Toys', with little to no critical engagement or resistance. Our findings are compatible with the view that closeness to caregiving practices without formal pedagogical education would further reproduce traditional gender norms.

University students find themselves in a middle ground, an in-between space. Often, they reproduce traditional gender stereotypes but also take individual variation and cross-gender preferences into account. Their simultaneous talk of naturalisation and growing awareness of equality suggests an unsettled ideological space, drawing on gender discourse but through selective exposure rather than sustained critical engagement.

Respondents in media and creative professions exhibit a critical, reflective orientation. The way they respond usually concerns the encoding of gendered meanings in images (in this respect, it closely relates to the node Visual Representation of Gender). It suggests that the practice of visual production in a professional capacity may foster greater consciousness of representational politics.

Lastly, the results indicate that respondents with backgrounds in government or the private sector have a normative orientation driven by emerging awareness. Explicit resistance is still rare, but social norms and pressures at play are often noted. Within this grouping, gender ideology is primarily articulated as reflecting rather than critiquing society.

Table 3

Gender Ideology Across Professional Backgrounds

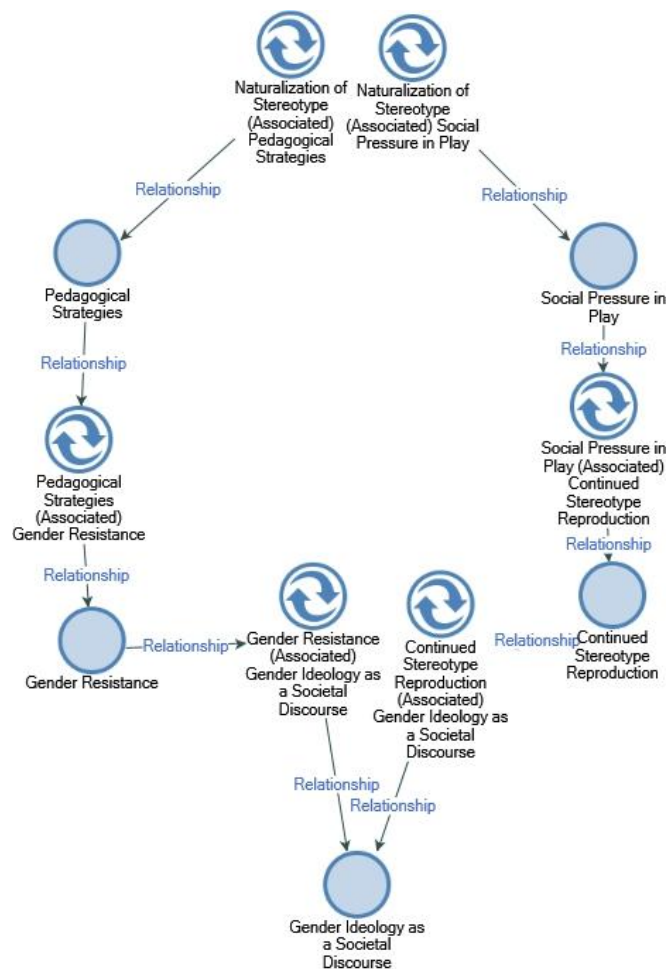
Professional Background	Dominant Ideological Pattern	Key NVivo Activated	Nodes	Representative Discursive Features
Early Childhood Education Teachers / ECET	Hybrid (Naturalization + Resistance)	Naturalization of Stereotype; Resistance; Equality Awareness	Gender of Gender	Acceptance of gendered toys as “normal” coexisting with explicit calls for flexibility and equal access
Lecturers	Critical–Resistive	Gender Resistance; Gender Equality Awareness; Curriculum Awareness	Resistance; Equality Hidden	Explicit critique of gender bias, focus on ideological impact and pedagogical responsibility
Bunda PAUD Caregivers	Normative Naturalized	Naturalization of Stereotype; Toys	Gendered	Common-sense framing of gendered preferences as “wajar” or natural

University Students	Transitional Ambivalent	/	Naturalization of Stereotype; Gender Equality Awareness	Simultaneous reproduction of stereotypes and acknowledgment of individual differences
Media & Creative Professionals	Critical- Reflective		Gender Resistance; Visual Representation of Gender	High sensitivity to visual bias and symbolic representation
Government / Private Sector	Normative Emerging Awareness	with	Naturalization of Stereotype; Social Pressure in Play	Emphasis on social norms with limited critical reflection

These cross-professional patterns are summarised in Table 3, which shows how gender ideology operates as a socially distributed discourse rather than a belief system. These results illustrate the mediating role of professional positioning in balancing between the reproduction of stereotypes and resistance to ideologies, providing an empirical basis for understanding asymmetrical gender progressivism in the subsequent section.

Figure 1

Gender Ideology as a Societal Discourse



The nature of gender will be imbued in other areas of micro practices developed in the context of early childhood education settings, so these findings suggest that the notion of gender representation cannot be merely considered a series of fragmented or personal preferences or individual attitudes. Instead, gender acts as a discourse that is constantly created, contested, and naturalized via discourse, imaging, and pedagogy. In this print, early childhood settings are conceptualized as sites where the social meanings of gender become factual business and unquestionable.

Naturalization is the overarching ideological mechanism through which respondents make sense of gendered play and representation across the NVivo-rooted analyses. Terms like *wajar* ‘normal or natural’ come up again, regardless of one's profession, signaling the way that gendered toy choices and emotional traits are framed not as a social construction but as a developmental reality. It does not engage in direct prescription but instead functions sub textually by sexing both male and female elite sports as ordinary, domestic, and cultural. Gender ideology is then reproduced right where it is most seen as neutral or even benevolent.

Note that the data also show that a spectrum of reflexivity and resistance accompanies naturalization. Moments of critical awareness among educators and lecturers include flexibility, equality, and pedagogical responsibility. But such resistance is more an articulation within than a challenge to the wider discursive field in which naturalization embeds itself. Thus, gender ideology is less a stable or fixed worldview and more a socially contingent discursive formation dependent on professional structuring, locally embedded institutional policies and practices, and everyday rationale regarding the role of gender and sex in schooling.

This discursive configuration has a substantial effect in early childhood settings. However, if gendered representations are not interrogated, they risk normalizing and perpetuating unequal expectations while creating a veneer of inclusivity. When gender ideology is grasped as a mode of discourse within society, these apparent contradictions are legible not from the standpoint of the individual but as structural components of early childhood education itself. These components cannot be mandated but can be engaged pedagogically if the engagement is rich and complex enough, enabling some transformation of these components.

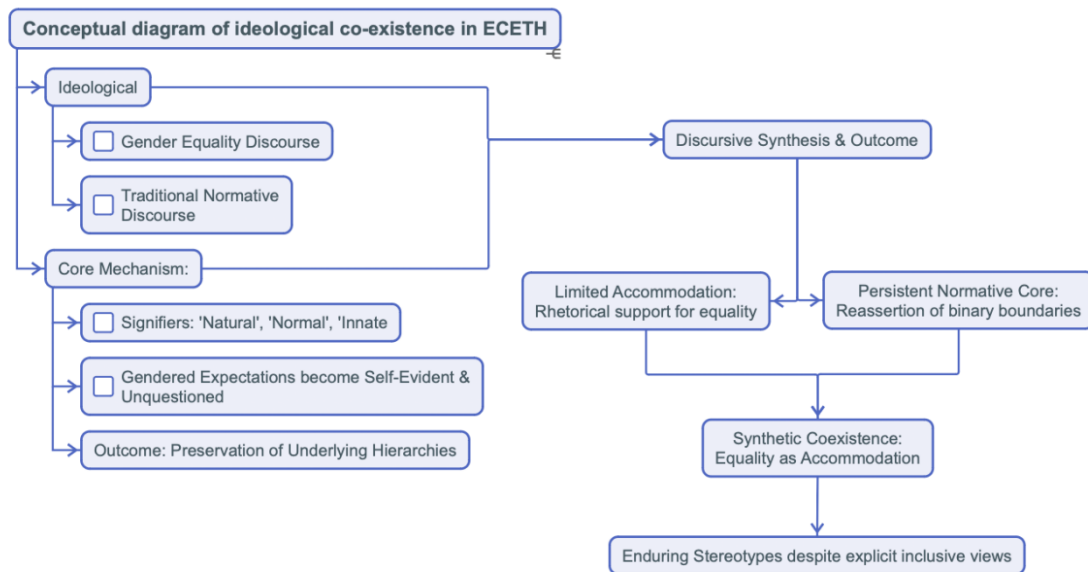
3.3 Naturalization and resistance: explaining ideological co-existence

Analyses reveal some of the most salient patterns, including the simultaneous presence of gender stereotyping and gender awareness in the same discursive space. Instead of displacing traditional norms, gender-equal rhetoric often runs parallel to the sustained reproduction of stereotypical belief systems. This must coexist to explain why perceptions of gender stereotypes persist even in the minds of respondents who are explicitly flexible, inclusive, or equal.

The ideological mechanism underpinning this obstinacy is naturalization. Genders are naturalized through terms such as *wajar* 'natural or normal', which should be discursively present as powerful signifiers that allow readers to justify gendered expectations unapologetically. When a child must only play with pink toys or cry in public or set their sights on being a nurse (but not a doctor) for the rest of their life, those things are no longer open to critical examination, because they are construed as innate. So here, naturalization functions not as an explicit challenge to gender Equity, but rather as an implicit smoothing process that ensures the existing hierarchy persists while allowing some space for modification.

NVivo coding shows that resistance occurs in piecemeal, contingent ways. Questioners may claim to give children the space to pursue their own interests but reaffirm binary gender orientations as normative. These discursive moves expose how noticing gender and practising ideological change are not the same thing. Instead, resistance is often framed within the limits of what remains socially acceptable, creating a synthesis discourse that opens the door to change while failing to challenge normative gender logic fundamentally.

This co-existence of ideologies implies that equality in early childhood settings is perceived more as accommodation than as change. Stereotypes persist not because they are unaware, but because naturalization makes them pliable to other progressive language. Awareness of this dynamic is critical to discerning gender-neutral assertions, as it highlights the challenge of combating not just overt prejudice but also the covert discursive modes that perpetuate inequality. This is a conceptual diagram of ideological co-existence in ECETH.

Figure 2*Conceptual diagram of ideological co-existence in ECETH*

3.4 Asymmetrical gender progressivism

This study makes a key theoretical contribution by defining asymmetrical gender progressivism as a new central pattern for understanding current talk about gender in early childhood settings. This idea relates to a gated form of gender equality that allows scope and opposition for girls more than boys. This form of progressivism does not herald a broad-scale subversion of gender norms; instead, it operates asymmetrically, advancing women while doing little to change masculine norms.

This asymmetry is evident in the NVivo-based analysis. Respondents across different professional backgrounds often endorsed or recommended that girls play with masculine sex-role toys like cars or balls. This was usually described in an aspirational way, associated with independence, self-assurance, and progressive education. In contrast, coding patterns often associated such responses with nodes of Gender Resistance, Gender Equality Awareness, and Female Active Representation, with the implicit conclusion that girls entering male-dominated spaces were perceived by many as a victory.

In contrast, instances of boys playing with feminine-coded toys, especially dolls, were alarmingly underreported. These possibilities, when made, were often tentative or implicit. This silence is analytically significant. When boys crossed gender categories,

there was no discussion about it (i.e. reverse discourse), coupled with high activation of Naturalisation of Stereotype and Emotion & Masculinity, suggesting that masculinity remains a shielded normative category. Femininity is allowed to "grow" towards masculinity in this arrangement, but masculinity itself is not allowed to be redefined.

This same asymmetry can be seen in conversations about emotional expression. If one aspect of emotional openness is increasingly normalised for girls, depictions of vulnerability in boys (for example, crying or feeling fear more openly) are not—either not voiced at all or quietly pathologized. A robust model of masculinity based on control, strength, and emotional regulation against which boys are encouraged to continue to measure. Analysis with NVivo coding reveals that emotional restraint remains a naturalized expectation for boys, thereby reinforcing and reproducing a particular masculinity. It demonstrates that gender progressivism is not equally distributed across the domains of behavior and emotion.

All these patterns together can be interpreted as gender-related topics in early childhood and are perceived as mostly access-related to structural. Girls are allowed to occupy new spaces that once belonged to boys, and this counts as progress: yet the masculine hierarchy that created the space imbalance goes unchallenged. Rather, equality is additive, more options for girls inch by inch, but not transformative, in the sense of analysis of how traits, toys or emotions get gendered to begin with.

Asymmetrical gender progressivism helps to conceptually explain why gender-inclusive language and imagery, often even celebratory, clearly coexist with inequalities that remain largely intact. The research lays bare that one-sided targeting in progressive discourse can create conservative results by performing the gender binary. This asymmetry provides an additional leverage point from which to expand beyond binary assessments of bias/equality and thus to develop a more complex articulation of the uneven processes that shape gender ideology within early childhood education over time. This is an essential realization in arguments over changing gendered norms and in endeavors to create truly inclusive pedagogical resources.

3.5 Theoretical and practical implications

This research adds an essential chapter to scholarship on gender and early childhood education by moving from a linear theory of gender ideology (whereby women

are empowered by confronting their oppression) to one better able to represent change. Looking at gender progressivism, rather than depicting gender equality as a unidirectional trajectory from stereotypical gender roles to gender inclusivity, the findings suggest an asymmetric pattern of Development. Asymmetrical gender progressivism, as the theory informs this, extends work on gender socialisation by demonstrating that femininity is more easily given to girls, whereas masculinity remains normatively stabilised. This realization poses a challenge to binary frameworks that link increased female representation with real gender change; anything else is just more women in the room.

The results also serve to invert the key ideological mechanism of naturalization. This stage of the project demonstrates that ideology typically works best when it passes itself off as usual or self-evident; that is, the study shows how gendered expectations are often framed in the most neutral, apolitical terms. It helps push discourse-oriented approaches in the gender field forward, demonstrating that resistance and reproduction are not two sides of the same coin, they can, and often do share the same discursive formations. This point of view provides an empirical foundation for theories that view gender as geo-sociocultural constructed, performative, relational, and contextually mediated or contingent rather than individually volitional.

Additionally, this study demonstrates the benefits of combining NVivo-derived qualitative rigour with ideological analysis. Illustrating the potential of qualitative software, the research combines thematic coding, matrix comparisons, and conceptual mapping not only to analyse complexity but also to theories social process. This is a particularly valuable methodological contribution for scholars who aspire to bridge conceptual breakthroughs with empirical depth in gender studies.

In practice, these findings inform the design and use of early childhood educational materials. Although inclusive imagery and gender-neutral messaging are becoming far more common, the research indicates that these are likely only to entrench latent asymmetries and inequities if they are about enabling girls and women, without a critical and constructive engagement with masculinity. Educational resources showing girls in active or traditionally boyish roles should be paired with representations that validate emotional expression, caregiving, and vulnerability for boys.

The findings suggest that educators and curriculum developers are well past due to transform access-based notions of equality into pedagogies of transformation. Highlighting the need to challenge gender stereotypes can help educators feel their efforts

are vital in creating inclusive spaces for all children. This calls for an intentional unpacking of the hidden curriculum embedded in images, stories, and routine practices within the space. The implications of this professional development for early childhood education teachers are to encourage programs that not only provide techniques but also build teachers' capacity as reflective practitioners and agents of critical change. The teacher is not only a passive recipient of knowledge from “experts,” but also an active agent who reflects, interprets, and contextualizes it.

At the policy and training levels, the variation across professional backgrounds suggests that gender awareness cannot be assumed, even among those working in early childhood contexts. Professional Development programs should therefore incorporate critical reflection on gender ideology, emphasizing how well-intentioned practices may still reproduce normative assumptions. By foregrounding ideological asymmetries, educators and stakeholders can better equip themselves to foster learning environments that support genuinely inclusive and equitable gender socialization for all children.

4 CONCLUSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTION

Based on the data analysis and discussion, the following conclusion can be drawn: The results show that, in terms of order of mention, males are still more dominant than females. Therefore, the title "gentlemen (and) ladies" is more commonly used than "ladies (and) gentlemen". Recognizing this cultural influence can foster respect and nuanced understanding among educators and policy makers. Language representations seem to shape more powerful male roles and male gender identities that are at the forefront of society. The results show that gender ideology is not a stable or fixed worldview, but rather a discursive formation shaped by social contingencies that depend on professional, locally embedded institutional structures, policies, and practices. Gender Ideology in Early Childhood Education is Still Trapped in Stereotypes

Gender is naturalized in terms that do not serve as an explicit challenge to gender equality, but rather as an implicit refinement process that maintains existing hierarchies while allowing some room for modification. Recognising how subtle language influences perceptions can help educators and policymakers feel more insightful and motivated to reflect on their practice. This is an essential realisation in the argument about changing gender norms and in the effort to create truly inclusive pedagogical resources.

The limitations of this study are evident in its focus on specific levels. Future studies should explore areas that have not yet been examined, such as teacher handbooks for primary and secondary schools. This ongoing effort aims to deepen our understanding of gender and support future scientific work on gender-friendly educational resources.

The recommendations from this study are as follows: Gender equality indicators in the teacher's handbook should be gender sensitive. ECETH, curriculum developers, and guidebook writers are expected to select, use, or prepare teaching materials that support and respond to gender equality and inclusive child identity development from an early age. Furthermore, ECE teachers act as active agents who reflect, interpret, and contextualize knowledge. They need training on gender equality to be more responsive to it in the context of achieving SDGs 5 and 4. Providing such training can foster confidence and a strong commitment among teachers, both of which are essential for effectively advancing these goals. The need for training also emerges in various answers to open-ended questions related to the right way to learn/introduce gender equality to children.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Universitas Negeri Surabaya (UNESA) funded this research under the *non-APBN* grant scheme. The authors thank UNESA for providing the initial ideas for this article.

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Authors' Contribution

All authors contributed equally to the development of this article.

Data availability

All datasets relevant to this study's findings are fully available within the article.

How to cite this article (APA)

Laksono, K., Anistyasari, Y., Nasrullah, R., & Imawati, E. THE REPRESENTATION OF GENDER IDEOLOGY IN THE EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION TEACHER'S HANDBOOK. *Veredas Do Direito*, e4079.

<https://doi.org/10.18623/rvd.v23.n2.4079>