

Gender in Early Childhood Education

Implementing a Gender
Flexible Pedagogy

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Introduction: The Value of a Gender Flexible Pedagogy

Introduction

This book is intended as a resource for all those who are interested in dismantling the **gender binary** and who recognise the value of leading the way in the Early Years sector. It promotes the deconstruction of **gender stereotypes** with young children and offers a new concept for achieving this aim: the powerful and functional concept of a '**gender flexible pedagogy**'. This is based on teachers' modelling of gender flexible behaviour at the same time as the provision of resources and activities for children's own gender flexibility. It is written at a time of considerable public interest in matters concerned with gender and sexuality which has brought about a focus on the ways that educators can support positive changes in gender understandings and practices. The scope of the book is international and is based on an international research base, although a high proportion of the author's own research has been undertaken in the United Kingdom.

Aim of the Book: To Promote a Gender Flexible Pedagogy

The concept of a gender flexible pedagogy is practical, theoretically grounded and really useful to all those who have a professional or non-professional role in raising the next generation. It was introduced by Warin and Adriany (2017) to draw together two different foci of gender theory and practice in early childhood education. It combines ideas about the activities and resources that are deliberately made available to young children with ideas about teachers' behaviours and approaches. It interweaves staff modelling of alternative forms of masculinities and femininities together with explicit gender teaching within curricula. It has implications for both what is taught and how, for '**pedagogy**', incorporating implications for teachers and for teaching.

This concept can be turned into highly practical prescriptions for early childhood educators. These include ideas about how teachers can challenge gender stereotypes in their classrooms, the monitoring of resources for gender bias, how we can work with parents to reduce gender binary language, and how staff teams can collaborate to counter traditional gender roles in their own division of labour within the Early Years setting. So the key aim of this book is to promote this idea of a gender flexible pedagogy in early childhood education, and this concept will be a running theme throughout the book.

First, I want to contextualise this aim in two relevant and fairly recent societal changes:

- changes in perceptions and feelings about gender equality;
- an increasing value for children's 'voice', agency and well-being.

Sea Changes in Gender and Education

Gender

It feels as if we are currently on the crest of a large and forceful gender wave which has gathered momentum from the media, social media and everyday conversation, and is pushed along by more and more gender-focused research. Understandings of gender – how it is experienced and how it affects lives – are changing rapidly. For example the Everyday Sexism movement, commenced in 2012 by Laura Bates, has had a huge impact, creating an international resistance to a continuing toleration of abuse against women and girls. Relatedly, the social media #MeToo campaign became a tipping point for sexual harassment to be taken seriously. Tarana Burke originated the catchy 'Me Too' phrase in 2006 which was then popularised on a global scale in allegations directed at Harvey Weinstein and others to demonstrate the prevalence of sexual harassment and assault. These powerful international

movements have led to the declaration that ‘we are in the midst of a gender revolution’ (*National Geographic*, January 2017). Gender equality is also prominent within the United Nation’s Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (United Nations, 2021) where SDG number 5 aims to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls, as an underpinning to all the other SDGs.

At the same time there has been an increase, especially through social media, in activism and campaigns for the rights and recognition of LGBTQ+ groups and sub groups and most recently, a surge of interest especially from young people, in gender non-binary groups and individuals. In 2011 Rankin and Beemyn, in the United States, uncovered growing gender diversity from their 3,500 surveys and 400 interviews with trans-masculine, trans-feminine and gender-non-conforming people. They found that respondents, especially young people, used more than a hundred different ways to describe their gender identity. Many said describing their gender was not easy, with some resorting to percentages to describe their identities (such as one-third male, one-third female and one-third transgender) and others saying simply, ‘I am me’. In the United Kingdom, Bragg et al. (2018) revealed that young people who took part in their study used an ‘expanding gender vocabulary’ (p. 423) producing at least 23 different terms for gender identities. In her prize-winning novel *Girl, Woman, Other* (Evaristo, 2021), the fictional character Megan/Morgan discovers that the internet contains ‘hundreds of genders’ describing, with some hilarity, her attempt to navigate this complex world. Relatedly, Josephidou and Bolshaw (2020, p. 3) set out a helpful list of the current common labels that are used to talk about sex and gender in non-binary, non-essentialist ways. Meanwhile a new generation of feminists have engaged with gender theory and activism through social media, and blogs such as ‘Feminism 101’ which updates feminism for a new generation. The cumulative impact of these gender-focused public and social media debates is a strengthening of a value for regarding gender as socially constructed phenomenon and a strong rejection of gender ‘essentialism’.

A trio of recent landmark books, by Fine (2017), Rippon (2019) and Gillies et al. (2017) are worthy of mention at this point as they point out the damaging nature of gender ‘essentialism’. The term essentialism implies the belief that a person’s gender is innate, ‘hard wired’, essential in the sense that is part of their essence. Many people hold this belief linking **gender essentialism** to biological differences between males and females. This deeply implicit belief, fostered and perpetuated by our gendered society, implies that society will never succeed in overturning ingrained ideas about the deep rootedness of gender difference. These books have made an important contribution to the gender revolution as they emphasise the enduring dominance of claims about biology and innate gender differences and they reveal the continuing influence of gender binary thinking. Each author demonstrates the power of ‘pseudoscience’ (Fine, 2017) and ‘neurosexism’ (Rippon, 2019) to show how a mythology has arisen supporting supposedly ‘scientific’ arguments to bolster myths about gender differences entailing the forces of genes, neurones and hormones. Gillies et al. (2017) offer an illuminating take on this

approach as they show how the Early Years sector is particularly susceptible to arguments that reify science especially neuroscience: ‘By adopting the language of neuroscience, early years practitioners can demonstrate knowledge and proficiency’ and ‘augment the status of their professions’ (p. 80).

There is also a huge growth in our awareness and understanding of transgender, a giant step in the direction of a transformation to a less gender-rigid society. Many academics and researchers who work with the concept of gender are now part of an ambitious attempt to transform traditional gender binary thinking into a value for **gender fluidity**. Such people are making a concerted challenge to gender essentialism which implies that a person’s gender is fixed in time, unmalleable and impermeable. Relatedly, the very concept of transgender disrupts the crude categories of man/woman; masculinity/femininity and implies a world of gender nuance and variability (Warin & Price, 2020). The children and young people (aged 12–14) who took part in the study by Bragg et al. (2018) cited above included young people who identified with and used ‘trans’ categories (e.g. gender fluid, agender, non-binary and gender-diverse) (p. 421).

Education and children’s well-being

Meanwhile, from another quarter a different and much slower wave of change can also be observed: the gradual emergence of a value for children’s well-being and rights. We could first see this coming back in the 1990s with the work of James and Prout (1990) and the announcement of a revolution focused on children’s ‘voice’. This flow of change has been incredibly slow and has often been impeded altogether for example with the closure of England’s **Children’s Centres**, fragmentation and privatisation of early childhood education services. However, it has picked up speed recently with the forcefulness of the young climate-changers in their school strikes and prescient activism and their inescapable demand to be heard. This is one area where it is now impossible to ignore the voices of children and young people.

In addition, there has been a growing concern with the emotional well-being of children. This concern has been manifested in two ways. Firstly, the last two decades of schooling have seen several school initiatives focused on providing forms of holistic and emotional support for children and a growing awareness of a need to foster children’s emotional literacy (Weare, 2004). A landmark report in 2007 by UNICEF showed how badly we, in the United Kingdom, compared on measures of overall childhood well-being with the 20 other surveyed countries and reminding us that ‘The true measure of a nation’s standing is how well it attends to its children’ (UNICEF, 2007, p. 1). This report caught the public eye and was much discussed in the UK media leading to a growing anxiety from politicians and academics to attend to children’s well-being. Partly in response to this national hand-wringing, Layard and Dunn (2009) produced their report for The Children’s Society, entitled *A Good Childhood: Searching for Values in a Competitive Age* (with subsequent reports including the most recent in 2021). The title indicated the authors’ challenge to the

neoliberal school standardisation agenda where educational goals are framed through international competition league table comparisons, and through the pitting of one school against another. This aspect of the educational ‘market’ was still relatively new at this time with its resultant ‘performance culture’ where pupils experienced their worth through narrow forms of assessment and examinable academic outcomes. Academics at the time were also aware of a lack of educational purpose (Hayward et al., 2005) and ‘a hollow lack of clarity’ at the core of educational policy (McLaughlin, 2005) about the purposes of schooling in the United Kingdom. The New Labour government of the millennial years commissioned the Rose report (2009) to examine the state of primary education at the same time as an incredibly thorough independent primary education review was produced by Alexander and colleagues at Cambridge – the Cambridge Review (Alexander, 2010). Both reviews had a new emphasis on children’s enjoyment and well-being. However, these reports fared badly and were not able to exert any influence as they were swept aside by the incoming 2010 Coalition government with its renewed emphasis on academic performance especially exams, and a ranking of schools based on the number of GCSE entrants in core subjects.

Dualistic thinking in framing educational purposes: Influences of neoliberalism

Educational sociologists writing about policy during this era described the dualistic thinking that underlined policy and pedagogy. The influence of easily measurable performance goals driven by neoliberal economic competition, and philosophies of personalised teaching derived from child-centred values, was noted as fundamentally incompatible (Biesta, 2014; Shuayb & O’Donnell, 2008). Ball’s global review of the preceding 20 years of education policy (2008) revealed that ‘Within policy, education is now regarded primarily from an economic point of view’ (p. 11). He identified a dualism in schools, an ‘institutional schizophrenia’ based upon a divide between competing values, between a teacher’s own intuitive judgements about good practice and the contrasting demands of standardisation (Ball, 2003, p. 222). Keddie (2016) looked at the influences of neoliberalism on children themselves. She used the term ‘children of the market’ (p. 109) to describe children’s own ideas about purposes of education suggesting, disturbingly, they have become focused entirely on what it means to be ‘economically successful’.

The ‘well-being’ agenda has shifted from an overall concern with children’s happiness to a concern for their mental health (DfE, 2017a; NHS Long Term Plan, 2019). In July 2018, the government published health education guidance for schools with mental well-being considered equally important to physical well-being – alongside the new introduction of ‘Relationships and Sex Education’ (Parkin & Long, 2021). A concern with mental health has been exacerbated in recent times due to the influence of COVID-19 which has shone a light on the exponential growth of minor and major mental health issues in children and

young people. A recent report (Lally, 2020) emphasised the influences on strained family relationships, academic stress and reduced contact with friends, alongside a reduction in the services that support children with mental health concerns (CAMHS). Consequently, at the time of writing there is much more government policy noise than previously on the mental health of children and young people.

How far is the Early Years sector subject to the kinds of ‘institutional schizophrenia’ that Ball identifies? In many ways this sector experiences a much greater degree of freedom from some of the pressures exerted by the influences of neoliberalism. It has always been understood that purposes of care are integrated with the purposes of education for the 3–6-year-old age group. In addition the concept of play, and practices associated with it, soften the performance culture that dominates the education of older age groups. Interestingly, Early Years practitioners sometimes describe their draw to this profession due to its ‘low pressure’ environment. For example, as part of the research I have undertaken with male teachers in the Early Years (in England, Sweden and Indonesia), I have been told that the attraction to work in this sector is indeed the feeling of freedom that is gained in comparison to the external pressure of teaching older children and young people. In the study I undertook with Swedish male pre-school teachers (described in Warin, 2016), the term ‘freedom’ was used by all the five men in discussing their values, and their rationales for teaching this particular age group.

However, although the Early Years may be less constrained by an educational performance culture focused on narrow academic achievement, it is increasingly subject to the influences of managerialism based in a neoliberal accountability culture, with an increase in such bureaucratic practices as frequent report writing and documentation (Löfdahl, 2014; Löfgren, 2014). In England Bradbury and Roberts-Holmes (2017) have drawn attention to the ways that schools experience an increasing pressure to contribute to national data required by the schools inspection service (OfSTED) that is aimed at developing the progress, not of the child, but of the school in order to facilitate comparisons between schools. They point out that a school’s ‘OfSTED story’ requires baseline measures for the very young despite differences from the rest of the primary school in terms of **curriculum** and culture (p. 944). Recently, and as a result of neoliberal accountability, and the market driven nature of education, the UK government have just introduced baseline testing in English and Mathematics for 4 year olds. There has been an outcry from early childhood education teachers and parents about this unnecessary and undermining task. For example, Goldstein et al. (2018) pointed out the atmosphere of uncertainty that was created in schools when the plans were announced. The organisation ‘More than a Score’ actively campaigned against this plan and attracted 700 experts to back up their resistance in an open letter to the **DfE** describing the plan as both pointless and damaging. Recent critiques have been offered by Robert-Holmes and Moss (2021) and Blanco-Bayo (2022). Despite

the resistance, baseline testing is now statutory for children starting their ‘reception’ year in school.

The resistance to this last imposition of a damaging measurement culture on the very young has perhaps intensified a shift towards the well-being pole of ‘institutional schizophrenia’. COVID-19 has reinforced this further. A possible silver lining is that the education of young children may now be based on a deeper attention to children’s own agency, a willingness to hear their voices about their education and a recognition that pre-school and school are for making friends, managing social relationships and having fun. However, anecdotal accounts from Early Years teacher friends suggest that this optimistic view is far from being realised. Although the new Early Years Foundation Stage (**EYFS**) curriculum appears to lessen staff workload through minimising written observations, there is still enormous pressure from OfSTED and in DfE guidance to devote much time on evidence collection demonstrating children’s progression.

Early Years educators have always had a deep concern with young children’s social and emotional well-being and have understood their pedagogic purposes to be equally focused on helping children to manage and maximise their social relationships as much as to develop their capacity for literacy and numeracy. Indeed, in this respect, education policy and practice for older students (including HE) has much to learn from the Early Years.

I have discussed two significant societal changes that concern the childhood and education of our young children: the gender revolution, the turn to children’s social and emotional well-being. When these transformative waves merge there is the potential for a sea-change in the world of gender and early childhood education, a combination of gender-fluidity and an elevation of children and young people. In my own country, and the world over, we need to raise the status of early childhood education and, at the same time, create social environments that celebrate gender fluid thinking. A way to operationalise this combined purpose is to make use of the concept of a gender flexible pedagogy.

Spotlight on Theory: Locating This Concept in Wider Theories of Gender

The identification of, and promotion of, a gender flexible pedagogy is based on an understanding of sociological gender-focused theory that relies on interweaving several older, deeper and more basic theories. I would like to peel back some of the theoretical assumptions that lie underneath the superficial presentation of a gender flexible pedagogy. So this section will be rather like peeling back the layers of skin in an onion, where the outermost layer, a ‘gender flexible pedagogy’, has an inner theoretical core (Figure 1.1).

So let us regard the outermost layer as a gender flexible pedagogy. We then peel back to see the deeper influencing layers; **queer theory; intersectionality; feminist poststructuralism**; the social construction of gender – at the core.

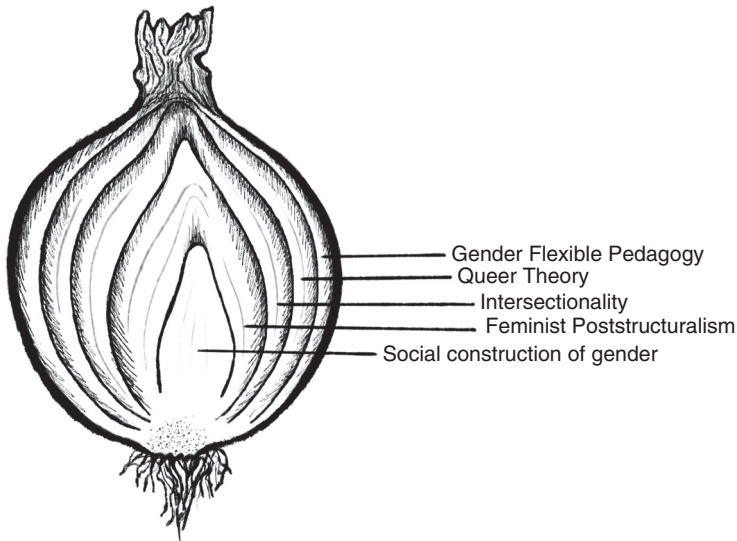


Figure 1.1 Onion diagram – illustration by Anna Warin

Queer theory

The layer of onion beneath the outer skin is Queer Theory, a powerful theory for linking current thinking about gender and sexuality together with broader ideas about the situated and plural nature of identity. This approach has the explanatory power to disrupt the gender binary of male/female and closely related binaries such as masculine/feminine and heterosexual/homosexual.

The word ‘queer’ has several meanings and was originally, of course, used in a pejorative way, in its sense as ‘peculiar’ (odd, different) as a form of homophobic slur. However, another use of the word, especially when used as a verb, means to spoil or ruin something – to disrupt. In this sense it is akin to Butler’s idea about ‘troubling’ or disrupting gender (1999). It is used to signal a deconstruction of the crude but well-established boundary between gender and sexuality binaries that are constructed through our binary language system (Jagose, 1996). The word has been reclaimed by LGBTQ+ activists and theorists as a positive theory with related activity to describe the intention to break down boundaries that are drawn too rigidly and that are based on essentialist categories. It is doubly powerful because it is simultaneously the word that often implies the LGBTQ+ community, and also implies a rejection of boundaries between norm-based categories. Queer has become a powerful verb signalling gender non-conformity at the same time as portraying a radical approach to tired old monolithic theoretical categories.

One such monolith is the concept of identity. Queer theory challenges the concept of identity as something that is fixed and necessary. It ‘aims to subvert the entire concept of identity’ (Thurer, 2005, p. 99) by emphasising the fluid, dynamic

and constructed nature of identities. It breaks down the idea that a person's gender and sexuality are fixed within their biological, sexed body, so it is an approach that emphasises the 'multiplicities of gender' and the 'pluralities of sexuality' (Robinson & Diaz, 2006) which in turn leads to a deconstruction of the gender binary. It challenges the taken-for-granted positioning of heterosexuality as the dominant sexuality and draws attention to the ways that non-heterosexual identities are 'othered'.

Intersectionality

It is impossible to ignore the identity essentialism of approaches to race and ethnicity as well as gender, especially since the escalation of 'Black Lives Matter' following the death of George Floyd in 2020. So, peeling back another layer of the theoretical onion, we find a deeper layer that asks us to question our treatment of gender as an independent social category and that highlights the crosscutting nature of social categories. This kind of theoretical questioning is known as **intersectionality** and is increasingly recognised and valued as a way of expressing flexible and fluid (and non-fixed) theories of identity. Valocchi (2005) hails queer analysis for its capacity to attend to intersectionality 'the crosscutting identifications of individuals along several axes of social difference' (p. 754). Identity theories that are based on an intersectional awareness draw on the feminist body of work represented by Crenshaw (2017) and others who identified the limitations of homogenous, tightly bounded, identity categories and who revealed the interweaving of different dimensions of difference such as class, race, ethnicity, age, nation, together with gender. Such theorists pointed out the restrictions of identity-based analyses and emphasised the analytic importance of intersectionality.

Poststructuralist theories (and their natural alliance with queer theory; transgender)

Poststructuralist theories of gender and identity are aligned with queer theory sharing an intention to break down boundaries that are drawn too tightly and that are based on essentialist categories. Josephidou and Bolshaw (2020) define post-structuralism as a theory that 'problematizes the idea that the "truth" is knowable', often seeking to disrupt that which is *seen* to be true' a definition based on Mukherji and Albon (2009, p. 31). The poststructuralist approach has challenged traditional psychological theories of identity which have always emphasised the unified and individualistic nature of self (see Warin, 2010). Many feminists have embraced poststructuralism because this underpinning intention to deconstruct boundaries is directed at gender-focused binaries in particular. MacNaughton (2000) is a strong proponent of feminist poststructuralist approaches to gender and especially to

gender in early childhood education. She interprets young children's gender-based practices as:

ways of being gendered that do not regulate but are *full of possibilities* for girls, for boys and for their teachers. These possibilities will always express a complexity of social relations and social practices. They will not be static or fixed but an expression of constantly negotiated meanings and relationships. (p. 3)

Her approach reminds us that identities, including gendered identities, are produced within and through social relationships. This means that they are fluid, ever-changing and not fixed. What is more, this approach acknowledges that social contexts are always composed of power dynamics between the participating players. An early feminist poststructuralist, Walkerdine, wrote a classic paper (1981) describing identity in a poststructuralist way as 'a nexus of subjectivities, in relations of power which are constantly shifting' (p. 14). Feminist poststructuralist approaches are tuned into sociolinguistics, recognising how power is exercised particularly through language. Binaries such as male/female, adult/child, heterosexual/homosexual are imbued with power relations. They 'operate to constitute and perpetuate artificial hierarchical relations of power between the paired concepts, which are perceived as polarised opposites' (Robinson & Diaz, 2006, p. 40).

A challenge to the dominance of gender binary thinking is also emerging from recent sociological studies into the upbringing of children who are gender non-conforming.

Gender variance exposes the limits of the gender binary and the overly deterministic role it ascribes to assigned sex, in turn signalling possibilities for social change against dominant ideologies and practices. (Rahilly, 2015, p. 339)

The significance of transgender identity is not new within debates about gender. For example Halberstam's influential book on female masculinity (1998) supports the idea that masculinity does not reduce down to the male body – and femininity to the female body. However an interest in transgender is developing apace in many countries such as the United States, where Rahilly's studies were located and in the new academic discipline of transgender studies (Martino & Cumming-Potvin, 2020). Pre-school managers and practitioners are becoming alert to the possibilities of transgender, in its various manifestations, including possibilities for children who feel 'trapped in the wrong body' and children who want to play with the possibility of different gender identities. As Vollans (2016) points out in her article for pre-school practitioners, transgender can be seen 'as a challenge to the certainty and rigidity of the categories male and female – trans is a challenge to this and an escape from it' (p. 31).

We have seen how the theories promoted through feminist poststructuralism, expanded by queer theorists and advocates of transgender, add up to a dismantling of the gender binary.

The theoretical core of the onion: The social construction of gender

At the heart of the theoretical layers I have identified lies the idea that gender is a socially constructed phenomenon. It is not innate. We make it up. It is not ‘an absolute truth that exists but rather an understanding of how people choose, or are obliged, to act in specific gendered ways’ (Josephidou & Bolshaw, 2020, p. 3). Butler’s concept of performativity (1990) challenges gender as a fixed identity and draws attention to the ways that gender is not only constructed but is performed and ‘fabricated’ in acts and gestures (1999, p. 173). Her work rests on the understanding that gender identities are socially situated, a point which she expands to argue that the practices of self-presentation bring about the creation of gender identities.

For those new to theorising about gender, the above section may seem a little overwhelming. So let me reduce this to a couple of related statements that sum up key principles to take forward as you read the rest of this book.

- Gender is something that we make up and perform. It is not innate, biologically determined or God-given.
- This means that we can construct it differently and perform it differently. We can change our thinking. We can do this in way that benefits individuals and society at large by removing our made-up gender boundaries, constraints and binaries.

These points mean that we can develop gender flexibility and that teachers in particular, specifically Early Years teachers, have a crucial role in delivering a ‘gender flexible pedagogy’, which I now elaborate more precisely.

The Concept of a Gender Flexible Pedagogy

In order to explain what I mean by this concept, I want to talk first about the ‘gender flexible’ element and then about the ‘**pedagogy**’ part of this term.

I have chosen the term ‘gender flexibility’ to identify my approach to the transformation that I see as necessary and the potential for change in early childhood education. Yet there are some closely related terms that are beginning to be pervasive in current discussions of gender such as ‘gender fluidity’, ‘gender neutrality’ and ‘**gender sensitivity**’. So I’ll just take a moment to explain my own take on the differences and my preference for ‘gender flexibility’.

I find that the term gender-neutral can imply a disregard for gender – a kind of **gender blindness** or lack of gender awareness. I was interested, and impressed, to see that the brilliant TV documentary on the subject of gender in the primary school used the title ‘gender free’ rather than gender neutral. Produced in 2018 to much acclaim it was entitled *No More Boys and Girls: Can Our Kids Go Gender Free?* (will be referred to again in this book). The preferred term ‘gender free’ suggests a consciousness of the influence of gender in young children’s lives and a wish to free ourselves from it. Whereas ‘gender neutral’ implies a pretence that gender does not exist as the incredibly influential social construction that we all, to a greater or lesser extent, collude in perpetuating.

Gender sensitivity is an extremely useful term which describes a goal of gender consciousness or gender awareness. I prefer it to the term gender awareness as the emphasis on sensitivity suggests that nuances are possible. A person might be a little gender aware in some contexts, highly conscious of gender in others and perhaps somewhat insensitive in others. Sensitivity suggests the position that we can actually learn and develop through the right kinds of sensitisation interventions. Gender sensitivity is the opposite of ‘gender blindness’, which is a disregard for the importance of gender as a mediating influence in social interactions.

Gender fluidity is also a very rich term which has uses beyond the realm of education and schooling. It challenges gender ‘essentialism’ suggesting gender is not fixed but is instead a free-flowing experience which changes from one context to another and will change within a person’s lifespan, changeable across time and place. Butler’s words elaborate the concept nicely where she describes gender as a ‘free-floating artifice’. She goes on to explain that the categories ‘*man* and *masculine* might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and *woman* and *feminine* a male body as easily as a female one’ (Butler, 1990, p. 6). We can see that gender fluidity is closely aligned to queer and poststructuralist theories. It has also been adopted as a relevant term to emphasise gender non-conformity and transgender.

Gender flexibility is particularly useable within an educational context especially one where gender-sensitive staff can make conscious choices to challenge traditional gender stereotypes within their own behaviours, appearance choices and performances in front of children and in the resources and activities they create with and for them. The term gender flexibility arose from data I collected at **Acorns** pre-school (Warin, 2018), a setting that had an unusually high proportion of male practitioners. (I will be demonstrating how this term actually works in practice and drawing on this case study in Chapter 5.) Gender flexibility links to the idea of the versatile, child-centred, pre-school teacher. Just as athletes train their bodies for flexibility, pre-school teachers can train themselves to perform versatile roles and activities.

So, in a nutshell, making sense of these terms and the relationships between them, I suggest that:

Gender neutrality is equated with gender blindness and is a misleading term for identifying the kinds of positive gender transformation we might hope to see in society. Gender sensitivity is vital and implies a necessary first step to the

development of a more gender fluid society, a liberating way to conceptualise gender freedom from gender essentialism. In the context of school, staff can strategically practice gender flexibility and encourage children to do so. In the pre-school, gender flexibility is part of a pre-school teacher's versatility as they respond to the varied needs of children.

And now for pedagogy. The term is in wide usage amongst those familiar with the world of education where it delineates an academic discipline. However, it is not part of everyday language so apologies to the educators whilst I briefly explain it, and argue for its value. It is sometimes used quite simply as a synonym for 'teaching' but it is more than this (and hence my reason for integrating it into my concept of a gender flexible pedagogy) as it implies an *approach* to teaching (defined as such in Wikipedia, 2022). It suggests an underpinning philosophy of teaching, based on theories of teaching and learning, as well as a set of practices. So it implies both what is taught and how it is taught: the behaviours, practices and disposition of the teacher and the learning experiences, resources, activities they place in front of the learner. The concept of pedagogy merits further discussion and is a focus of Chapter 4. So, overall, a gender flexible pedagogy is an approach that allows for principles of gender-flexibility to be practiced by the teacher within their teaching practices and underlying beliefs.

Turning Theory Into Practice to Develop a Gender Flexible Pedagogy

You may have read the above statements about gender flexibility, and associated terms, with a degree of critical cynicism and thought to yourself 'Hmm. Easier said than done!' You would be right. It is certainly easy to say and incredibly challenging to do; to change our deeply ingrained gendered ways of thinking that have been developed over centuries. We have to begin by developing gender-sensitive antennae which pick up on our own behaviours and language practices and which hone in on the gendered practices of others around us. Two nice examples illustrate what I mean by this.

In my own life as a parent, I noticed that I frequently referred to my two male children as 'the boys' when I was talking about them or to them. Why did I need to draw attention to their gender in this way? I noticed other parents similarly clustering children by gender when referring to them. Although most gender-enlightened teachers now no longer undertake the old-fashioned practice of lining children up in separate gender groups (although see Chapter 7), there are many more subtle ways of reinforcing and entrenching gender difference by simply referring, quite unnecessarily, to gender group membership as in the instruction to a group of boys 'Boys, please tidy up now'.

In the brilliant TV documentary, referred to above, *Can Our Children Go Gender Free?*, a primary school class teacher, Graham Andre, is made aware that he uses

affectionate terms when addressing the girls which he does not use with boys. Children in the class are tasked with catching him out every time he does this resulting, of course, in entertaining TV. This is the kind of subtle language practice that we need to become aware of and then ‘catch ourselves out’ every time we slip into these habits. So the first step to be taken in order to turn theory into practice is to develop gender-sensitive antennae.

How This Book Can Be Used

The book incorporates various pedagogical features such as case studies, stories about innovative practices, interview extracts and international comparisons. Each chapter will end with one or two reflective questions and also with the novel feature of a ‘Reader Challenge’. Whilst these hopefully make for an engaging reading experience for individuals, they can also be useful for groups within a professional setting or with friends and family.

The case study material and illustrative stories are based on the many years I have spent researching gender in education. I have now produced an internationally recognised body of research about men’s participation as teachers in early childhood education and care. Of relevance to the theme of this book, my research career has taken me through research on:

- young children’s construction of gender identities;
- research on family gender roles;
- an investigation of Swedish male pre-school teachers, referred to in this book as the **Swedish study**;
- an ethnographic case study of an English pre-school with a high proportion of male staff, referred to here as the **Acorns study**;
- a large-scale study of the recruitment and practices of male teachers in pre-school – the **GenderEYE project**.

Through various research publications, I have argued for and evidenced the concept of a gender flexible pedagogy: gender-sensitive teachers delivering a gender-sensitive curriculum.

A word about the terminology associated with early years sector

As I have developed as a teacher, researcher and academic within the English education system, the phrase ‘Early Years’ trips of my tongue as the familiar signifier of the educational phase that is provided for young children in this country. It is usually understood to cover the 0–5 years provision of professional support for young and very young children and babies. In other countries this phrase is not used and is not so intelligible internationally. Comparable descriptors are ‘Early Years

education' (**EYE**) and 'early childhood education' (ECE). In a recent international collaborative book on the topic of men's career trajectories as practitioners within this educational sector (Brody et al., 2021), the large international authorial team, which included myself, decided to use the term 'early childhood education and care' and its widely recognised acronym **ECEC**. Here, as indicated in the title of this book I will adopt the term 'early childhood education' as it has the advantage of being somewhat shorter and also very widely used on an international scale. However, the reader will find that the acronym **ECEC** occurs in some of the quotations from other academics writing about the early childhood education sector.

The structure of this book

This is informed by its aim of explaining, illustrating and promoting the concept of a gender flexible pedagogy. This is managed by responding to three key questions about the nature of this principle: what, who and how:

What is a gender flexible pedagogy?

Who is implicated in delivering a gender flexible pedagogy?

How can it be put into practice?

These questions frame the book structure by diving it into three sections.

Following this **Introduction** (Chapter 1), Chapters 2 and 3 form **Section I** and they examine the 'what' question by asking what is the content of a gender flexible pedagogy? How is it implemented in terms of curriculum? How does it impact on activities and provision of resources? Chapter 2 invites the reader to consider what curriculum means, who decides on it and what place gender has within it. Chapter 3 focuses on resources and activities for the early years which enable gender flexibility and help to 'smash stereotypes'.

The 'who' of gender flexible pedagogy is the concern of **Section II**, in Chapters 4 and 5. These concern key questions about the nature of the Early Years workforce: How Early Years practitioners are qualified and how they experience the rewards and challenges of the job. Chapter 4 discusses concerns about the diversity of the workforce and the recruitment of, and support for, under-represented groups. Chapter 5 highlights the versatility and flexibility necessary for a job in the early years. It draws on research about who does what within the Early Years setting and how gender mediates the allocation of roles.

Chapters 6 and 7 then form **Section III** and are focused on a discussion of 'how' the principle of gender flexible pedagogy may be promoted and practiced. Chapter 6 examines how gender impacts on relationships in the Early Years setting: peer relationships; adult/child relationships/staff team dynamics; the interaction between the ECE setting and its wider community of families. Chapter 7 examines the idea of gender sensitivity training and **unconscious gender bias**. It pays special attention to the importance of leadership in Early Years settings as way to establish a gender flexible pedagogy.

The book's **Conclusion, Section IV**, Chapter 8, crystallises the preceding discussion into a set of practical suggestions about the **what, who** and **how** of gender flexibility in ECE. It will position the potential contribution of a gender flexible pedagogy within the bigger transformative project of weakening the gender binary.

Finally, I end this introduction by encouraging you to take up the call to develop a gender flexible pedagogy. Read. Absorb. Discuss. Let this book help you to develop the gender-sensitive antennae that is vital if we are to help each other break down society's rigid and constraining gender binaries that reproduce the old gender order and perpetuate gender inequalities and injustices.