Young boys' Gender Identity in China: Exploring Implication on Gender Identity and Literacy in Early Child Education

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Abstract: This article explores the gender identity implication behind the "boy crisis" in China recently. It briefly explains what is gender identity and the factors affecting Chinese boys' gender identity formation. Also, it critically discusses issues about how early childhood literacy and teaching in China's develop and shapes boy's gender identity. Aims to provide the references to early childhood educators and draw societal attention to children's gender identity, especially boy's gender identity in literacy practice.

1. Introduction

China is going through a "male identity crisis",a phenomenon suggesting that male students lack masculinity. A multitude of measures have been taken in order to address the masculine crisis and help male students address their masculine identity. This investigates issues surroundings boy's gender identity both in social media and academic research.

It is becoming so much of an issue that masculine programs have been written into school curriculums. An online article from " Daily Caller " (2016) wrote on a new textbook entitled "Xiao Xiao Nan Zi Han" (Little Man) which is a six chapters been used to helping boys learn sexual psychology, sexual psychology, and what it takes to be a man in the modern world. For instance, the subjects discussed in this textbook involved "What are the differences between a boy and a girl?" "Why am I a boy and not a girl?" "What does a father mean to a son?"

These social issues have driven attention to boy's gender identity, masculinity in China and the gender stereotype imposed on boys. Boy's crisis has been treated as a gender identity disorder that brings bulk of physical and psychological problems .Cao, Yang and Luo (2016) suggest boys are experiencing a gender role conflicts in contemporary China, which evokes a series of problems after they reach adulthood, such as suicide and self-injurious. Huston (1983) explains that from biological aspect, children with gender identity disorder perform a lower level of androgen that causes a sex hormone disorder. It will affect sex differentiation of their psyche. However, Blaise and Taylor (2012) claim that any preference in gender identity could be viewed as normal instead a disorder. Their theory turns to explanations of gender identity through the norms of heterosexuality rather than assuming any kind of gender is normal.

The research presented below explores the male gender identity implication behind schooling and literacy learning in China. The purpose of this essay is to promote a deeper understanding

towards the multidimensional structure of boy's gender identity and offering empirical practices and measures in gender identity. Firstly, I will define gender identity and illustrate factors that impact Chinese male students' gender identity. Then, I will turn a critic eye on specific aspects: teaching environment and teaching context, to show how it shapes Chinese boy's gender identity. Finally I will critically analyse gender identity formation from schooling and literacy learning by comparing various social groups and combining Chinese culture background.

2. Gender Identity

Gender identity is a multidimensional self-concept that has a significant implication on an individual's development. Brown (1958) explains in a traditional and unitary way: gender identity is 'one's selfsameness and continuity in time'. More recently, post-structure theory and socio-culture theory researchers illustrate it differently.Holland et al., (1998) defined it from a socio- culture aspect, suggesting gender identity explores who the individual is in relation to others.

It may be correlated with parents' relationship and environment of growth. Past research believed that a boy might show 'feminine Protest' and prefer to be a female if their upbringing is absent of their father in his development. Because a boy growth without a masculine influence, the mother plays a dominating role and offers a feminine model in the boy's early childhood. A boy who is exposed to feminine model will acknowledge feminine characters and feel comfortable in a feminine role (Brown, 1958). Huttunen's (2017) analyses it from a different angle, father's perceptions of sex-stereotyped characteristics impact on the boy's gender identity more than his mothers' influence. However, there are many controversies about the conclusions of earlier studies concerning the father's influences gender role development. Moreover, it seems that numerous researches have failed to identify the correlations between father's gender role and son's gender identity (Huttunen, 2017; Huston, 1983)."In many studies the measurement of gender role orientation has been questionable or 'old fashioned', and for another, the quality of father-son relationships, such as warmth and closeness, has been ignored. In fact, the features of father-son interaction have been found to be important mediating variables(Huston, 1983, p. 432)".

Apart from parenting, schooling and literacy also play significant roles in boy's gender identity. I will analyse gender identity through the two main dimensions in this essay.

3. Teaching Environment

School is the first place providing a multidimensional setting for children to learn social skills, role and classes in large groups (Merrell et al. 2006). For example, children learn knowledge, social roles and gender norms not only through studying a textbook, but also via interactions and observations of their peers and teachers. Hence, it is essential for children's gender identity develops through their environment, teachers and classmates, curriculum design and teaching. A study in relation to children's gender identity in a single-sex school and a mixed-sex school has been carried out. The result shows children from single-sex schools behave to gender roles typicality and reported that they feel pressured to comply with gender norms than students from mixed-sex school (Drury et al., 2013).

According to Egan and Perry (2001), gender identity development can be divided into four perspectives: (1) intergroup bias: how much one gender can be superior in relation to the other; (2) feel pressure to comply with gender norms or gender stereotypes; (3) gender typicality: similarities compared to others in the same gender group; (4) contentedness: individual's view towards being a male or female. Yunger et al., (2004) analyse explicitly gender identity development within school by using Egan and Perry's theory (2001), they find that children in early childhood start to learn how to behave in a surrounding without family. They experience a series of processes from

becoming a social member, identifying gender categories, noticing gender content and norms of a specific group, being in a same-gender peer group, understanding intergroup biases and feeling stresses to capitulate to gender norms. What's more, gendered school setting cultivates teachers' gender typicality practices gradually. For example, a teacher teaches in an all boys' school, he or she may prepare a teaching plan according to boy's typical characteristics. Commonly boys are considered to be more disruptive and active in class, resulting that teacher may assume a more disciplined approach.

4. Difference in Boy and girl's Gender Identity Trajectory

In examining the differences between boys' and girls' gender identity, Martin, Ruble and Szkrybalo (2002) note a cognitive theory focusing on separating gender identity development into three essential stages: Identity; stability; constancy.

Firstly, children understand gender category and gender labeling via interacting with surroundings. In this stage, become children start to aware of biological sex differentiations and exploring the definitions between "masculine" and "feminine (Blaise and Taylor[1], 2012)." For example, a infant boy is more likely to become a man or father with 'powerful' 'brave' characteristics while a infant girl tend to be a woman or mother when she comes of age and she would be fascinated by makeup, nurturing or beauty. It is also consistent with an Eriksonian (1967,as cited in Blackburn, 2003) "identity" built through asking questions: who he or she is as a member of the cultural or social groups by comparing with other members. A boy explores his gender by asking questions: " who am I? " " Am I a boy or girl?" "What are the differences between my father and I?"

Secondly, children behave in a gender-appropriate way according to their understandings of gender and gender norms. A study carry out by Halim et al., (2014), reported that boys' feel more pressured to conform to gender norms than girls. Brown (1989) explains sociocultural advantages that our culture is masculine-oriented and still privileged to masculine role that will take the responsibility in our social life. In comparison with girls, boys are allowed less freedom. For example, a girl that prefers to be "tomboyish" is less restricted than a boy want to be a "sissy".

4.1 Teaching Context

Rayna (2001) finds interactive peer relationship and shared knowledge are beneficial to toddlers. It cultivates a sense of belonging that has an interactive effect on gender identity. It emerges from a sense to distinguish themselves from others through shared motivation and interests. Further more,the sense of togetherness and the sense of belonging interrelate. Togetherness can be fostered via shared memories, conversation and artifacts, such as sitting in the classroom, play grounds. For example, in a nursery, when the teacher plays a song, the children enjoy the song and will connect through singing along. In other word, singing together in the same classroom, installs a sense of "us" instead of "I". The teacher utilizes the song to create a common memory of togetherness so that forming a peer relationship and a sense of belonging. For example, there is a song named "row your boat", is a song where toddler are seated holding hands, and the teacher creates this situation through sing a song:
"Row, row, row your boat;
Gently down the shore;
If you see a lion don't forget to roar. "
The toddlers roar excitedly. They experience a moment of singing and sitting together in the same classroom, squeal loudly, which give them a sense of "us" instead of "I". The idea of "us" derives form a sense of belonging(Niland ,2015).

Blaise(2009) offers another example: 5-6 years olds children singing a song named "what a girl wants, what a girl needs" in the class. Then, the teacher groups them to discuss the topic around the meaning of the song. She found that most of them recognise dominant feminine and masculine roles and understand more than we think they know regarding gender. Such as "a girl can have a boyfriend, a girl is pretty and elegant with long hair." In this class, children take the initiative in expressing what they think of gender.

It involves Feminist post-structural theory, which turns our eyes on children themselves in their gender identity development. Feminist post-structural theory uses the concept "discourse" to show how it constructs between girls and boys through repetitive emphasis in daily life. For instance, romantic role-play, 7-year-old boys would like to make friends with girls in heterosexual role-play discourse. What's more, sexual teasing and taunting are found in those romantic role-paly, for example, "show me your panties"(Bhana, 2005). These romantic games reinforce the heterosexual perception and unequal gender power. Meanwhile, it results in limited choices to make friends as well as restricted gender performance, such as, "what should a man be in a romantic relationship?" " Who will be my friend if I am a boy?"

Blaise and Taylor(2017) note that recognising gender is a process of negotiation and the balance of power from those discourses. In other words, individuals have access to power and situate themselves in specific discourses. Thus children gender discourses in a flexible and changeable way, behaving differently to show their understanding of feminine and masculine traits. Taylor (2007) conducted a relative study through observing Nalin, a young Indian-Australian boy who participates in a gender play in a local nursery. In order to be accepted by the dominant White boys, Nalin firstly performed as a Ninja Turtle who features strong and powerful masculine traits. After a "real boy" identity has been recognised, Nalin changes his macho outfit with a red dress to be a girl superhero and regards himself as "Kim Possible."

4.2 Boy's Gender Identity in Chinese Culture Background

In China, "male identity crisis " displays a low level of gender typicality. Higher gender typicality is affected by "global self-worth, greater social competence, and lower sense of loneliness (Yu and Xie, 2008, P100)". They also found that children who live under pressure tend to have low gender typicality. Egan and Perry (2001) proposed that Chinese culture accords boys more pressure to conform with gender stereotype. Moreover, the stress of gender stereotype may decrease with age has been found only in females instead of males. In Chinese culture, gender stereotypes are relevant to gender roles, gender labels and gender constancy. The appearance of "boy crisis" and boy's gender identity adjustment might be associated with Chinese traditional culture and domination of masculine society. Gender reject role theory suggests that gender is a systematic process. It negotiates power that is from culture and two typical masculine traits and feminine traits by frequent interaction (Gal, 1991).

Yu and Xie (2010) has pointed out masculinity in China derived from Yinyyang philosophy and Counfucian theory, for instance, "nan zhu wai nv zhu nei" means male dominates mainly position in society and take the position as family leader while womanis regarded as a minority worker in the labor force and take charge over housework and child care. "Nan zun nv bei " means that man is treated more valuable than woman. In other words, a traditional family treasures a newborn boy more than a girl, because he is heir to continue the family line. A male heir was expected to manage the farm or find work to support the whole family, caring for his parents in old age.

However, Hong et al., (1985) argue that with the modernization of China, the government encourages women joining the workforce to flourish and develop the economy, women's status gradually elevated to be treated as equal as men. In the 1980s, women have taken part in and

launched a various public activities and revolutions, such as, social activism, religious activities and feminine discourse. An increasing number of women make a difference in social issues as well as domestic roles. Yu and Xie (2010) indicated that women receive advanced education and achieve higher status than ever before, and most women stay in the workforce although they get married or have children. However, this does not mean females dominate society. Men still occupy the essential positions wherever in business and politics, while women's occupation might be related to humanities and arts (Gal, 1991). Therefore, although female's status has changed, male still manage society. Which means that boys with masculine characters are more desirable than girls with feminine traits. On the other hand,Spakowski (2010)claims that the emergence of feminism challenges the masculine-orientation society, which cause governors make measures to ensure the masculine dominance. For example, teachers have been asked to address China's masculinity crisis by helping young males to "man up" by teaching male students how to be a 'boy'.

4.3 Literacy Learning and Teaching in Gender Identity

Literacy learning and teaching as an effective process of cultural inheritance, contributes to a deeper understanding towards the magnification of Chinese boys' gender identity. Levy(2016) links literacy concepts with literacy skills, it is an ability to read and write printed text. It has been perceived being a part of the "culture norms". More broadly, literacy can be an approach to help children understand the world by reading books or images, writing words, gesturing and appreciating artwork (Kuby and Vaughn, 2015).

Nevertheless, Gritter et al., (2017, P2) defined it from an opposite angle, they stated: "Children's literacy, like all art, is a reflection of resistance to the cultures from which it emerges". They also give an example: gender typical picture books are chosen by children themselves would reflect their gender identity. A boy reads a gender book with his own views of gender. Then, he might critique and resist the differences that those gender roles portray in the book. Therefore, the awareness and construct of gender identity is a significant tool to help children make a critical assertion towards what they read and write, especially for those boys, performed to a lower level when assessed. Levy (2016) points out that girls have a higher attainment in school-based literacy assessment than boys. Moreover, her study has posited that male students experience literacy underachievement may be due to them preferring literacy activities outside school rather than inside school.

Boy's literacy is important not only because their underachieving in literacy but also due to a number of gender stereotypes of male literary characters appear in the literatures. Taber and Woloshyn (2011) indicate that gender stereotypes exist in children literatures where men are confronted with violence and women defend their homes and family members. Additionally, children's literatures tend to portray female roles with calming, considerable, mannered and elegant while male roles are characterize by violent, strong, powerful, generous and diligent archetypes. Gitter (2017, P4) highlights boy's literacy from sociocultural aspects: "literacy is dependent on the sociocultural context of a literacy act and the values and beliefs of the individual or community reading, writing, or engaging in symbolic communication." Therefore, understanding Chinese culture and literatures development could contribute to analysing Chinese boy's literacy.

4.4 Gender Stereotype in Chinese boy's Literature

As it shows that gender stereotypes are maintained in boy's literature throughout history of children's literature development. Although gender stereotypes are similar in some cultures, the Chinese culture presents differently in gender stereotypes, gender roles and social values. I will illustrate the paper based on these differences and similarities to further the recognition that the

reasons gender stereotype dominate in Chinese boy's literature and how it affect Chinese boy's gender identity.

According to Egan and Perry's (2001, p4)multidimensional gender identity model, which I have explained in previous discussions. It consists with membership knowledge, gender typicality, gender contentment, intergroup bias, and felt pressure for conforming to gender stereotypes'.

Firstly, there are some similarities between Western cultures and Chinese culture: boys are more pressured to conforming gender stereotypes than girls. It was found that those pressure in relation to boy's parents attitude, boy's age and Chinese culture. Yu (2008) proposed that Chinese parents take different attitude that boys and girls comply with gender norm. Most parents concern boy's non-conforming behaviour than their female counterparts. It may exert pressure on boys but increase their gender contentment, because they feel they are treated more valued than girls.

On the other hand, according to Brown (1958), this gender stereotype fails to influence boys' gender identity because children's gender identity tends to be stable after 6 years old. He argues that from two years old, children start to recognize sex-role differences, distinguish maleness and femaleness trait. Then, it might level off at 6 years old. Spakowski(2011) agrees with children's biological cues of gender are fixed, but their gender preference can be changeable through socialization. He explains it in Chinese through comparing 'Xing Bie' (gender) and 'She Hui Xing Bie' (gender preference). He defines 'Xing Bie' focus on biological perspective. It is human nature and has relations with sex and gender roles. By comparison, 'She Hui Xin Bie' refers to male's and female's social role and neglects physical differences between genders. Children will watch and understand gender norms and roles. Then, they imitate parents and other social memberswho they contacted with. Moreover, other scholars have reported that any kind of gender preferences should be treated normal and children should be given powerto challenge gender norms via asking questions (Blaise and Taylor, 2012) Therefore, teaching and learning as an essential process of socialization, would exert an profound effect on boy's gender identity.

4.5 Literacy Learning and Teaching

In the reading of literacy, decoding text and image benefit what children understand the world (Levy, 2016). According to Levy (2016), reading is not just texts and images but contains the ability to pick up and understand different opinions and knowledge. In addition, gender stereotype is not only emerging in literatures, but also presents in boys' daily life. Such as, social media, advertisements and toys.

https://bitchmedia.org/post/mom-pop-culture-toys-pink-blue-feminist-parenting-gender

As this picture shows, girls' toys focus on household items, princesses and beauty with pink, red or light colours. On the contrary, boys' toys concern automobile, machine and architecture while using blues and greys. Therefore, it is necessary for early childhood educators to helping children

distinguish which stereotype would exert a disadvantageous influence. As Wharton (2005, p249) presents "the way that gender is portrayed in school books may be less important than the ways in which teachers and parents use these books with children".

On the other hand, literacy classrooms could be a place to deepen gendered stereotypes continually. Health literacy classroom communities might instruct boys to resist gender stereotypes. "Boy superhero stories sometimes took on relationship themes that borrowed from girl stories" (Dyson's 1997, p12). Dyson (1997) also recommends when boy superhero stories are not involved in girls, boys could create their own superhero scenario and add some female superhero characters in.

5. Conclusion

This article explores the gender identity implication behind the "boy crisis" in China recently. It briefly explains what is gender identity and the factors affecting Chinese boys' gender identity formation. Also, it critically discusses issues about how early childhood literacy and teaching in China's develop and shapes boy's gender identity. Aims to provide the references to early childhood educators and draw societal attention to children's gender identity, especially boy's gender identity in literacy practice. There are two main implications contained in this paper.

Firstly, the theoretically reviews illustrate boy's gender identity shaped by various elements. It focuses on school environment, teachers and classmates. We know that school shapes boy's gender identity through invisible power on gender norms and belonging to a gender group. It also mentioned teacher-student relations, teacher's gender and Chinese culture may affect boy's gender identity when compared with girls. Therefore, it is indeed possible for early educators to develop a new prospection: it does not assume any gender is normal but recognise gender identity is not constant and fixed.

Secondly, we move into the literacy that is embedded within socio-historical context. It focuses on boy's gender identity through reading and learning Chinese literatures. We see a historical development of Chinese boys' literatures, but gender stereotype and masculine characters still appear in those literatures. This paper encourages that teachers use critical literacy practices to guide boys exploring the "what is" to gender identity rather than shaping gender identity through literature learning.

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