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Gender balance in early childhood education: Reasons for the lack of male involvement, encouraging men into early childhood teaching, and the impact on children, families, colleagues and the early childhood sector

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In Aotearoa/New Zealand, less than 1% of male educators work in early childhood education [ECE], which is one of the lowest participation rates in the world (Farquhar, 1997; Farquhar, Cabik, Buckingham, Butler, & Ballantyne, 2006; Lyons, Quinn, & Sumion, 2003; Ministry of Education [MoE], 2007). Researchers have identified the lack of male educators as a problem for gender equity in different ways. Te Whāriki, a national early childhood curriculum, encourages children to “experience an environment where there are equitable opportunities for learning, irrespective of gender, ability, age, ethnicity, or background” (MoE, 1996, p. 66). However, there is actually no gender balance in early childhood programs in Aotearoa/New Zealand and children are often not able to experience having men as educators or caregivers. This paper will focus on reasons for the lack of male involvement in ECE and ways to encourage men into early childhood teaching. It will also explore how male educators may impact on children, families, colleagues and the early childhood sector.

Why are there so few male early childhood educators?

The lack of male educators in ECE has been debated in Aotearoa/New Zealand and internationally. Various studies show that there are barriers that influence men’s attitude to ECE as an occupation. Perception of teaching as ‘women’s work’, concerns about potential claims of child abuse, low salary, low social status, and the absence of a male peer group are common reasons for men avoiding teaching careers (A Bulletin of the Child Care Human Resources Sector Council, 2008; Cooney & Bittner, 2001; Farquhar, 1997; Farquhar et al., 2006; Marsiglio, 2009; New Zealand National Equal Opportunities Network [NZNEON], 2007). Australian researchers found that there are assumptions that only homosexual men were interested in ECE (Grbich, 1992, as cited in Farquhar, 1997; Lyons et al., 2005). British studies also found that the lack of male educators in ECE was influenced by associations of ECE with mothering, entwined ideas that such work was ‘natural’ for women and that men who were interested in it were ‘unnatural’ or ‘perverts’ (Lyons et al., 2005).

There are similar issues that ECE has been regarded as substitute mothering and fears of child abuse accusations (Farquhar et al., 2006). Since the early 1990s, high profile sex abuse cases also reduced public support for male
educators in Aotearoa/New Zealand’s ECE (Farquhar, 2005). In addition, research undertaken by Farquhar et al. (2006) has indicated that the low wages and low social status within the early childhood field are inter-related factors that could mean some men would never consider early childhood teaching as an occupation. Men tend to be the primary income earner in their families, in contrast to women, and, therefore, families may rely less on the woman’s income. Therefore, wage-level would be more important to men, as a group, than it is to women.

In her paper, Jones (2009) says that, unlike other countries, there has been no government intervention and policy to increase the number of male educators in Aotearoa/New Zealand. However, the Desirable Objectives and Practices advocate that employers should implement policies that are inclusive and equitable and reflect the principles of equal employment opportunities (MoE, 1998).

**How can we encourage more quality male educators into ECE?**

Peeters’ (2007, as cited in Jones, 2009) study shows that there are no countries in Europe that have managed to increase male participation without specific government policies to encourage it. In Aotearoa/New Zealand, O’Brien says that the MoE is “working on a new promotion strategy for teacher recruitment that focuses on lifting the status of teaching and increasing the diversity of the teaching workforce, including the proportion of men” (2012, para. 15). Jones argues that, through introducing a target for men in ECE, improving the status of ECE, providing targeted training and scholarships, national advertising, ensuring equality in working conditions and using indirect advocacy, the government could support the recruitment and retention of men (2009).

A recent survey undertaken in Britain shows that fifty-five percent of parents wanted male caregivers to work with their children (Children’s Workforce Development Council, 2009, as cited in Jones, 2009). Similarly, the findings of a national survey conducted by Farquhar (2012) show that most respondents welcomed the idea of specific government policy to encourage men into ECE. There are a range of suggestions to support an increase of male educators by helping to make ECE teaching an attractive career option, including: incentive grants to ECE services; setting performance indicators; scholarships; and media campaigns (Farquhar, 2012). However, some opponents of government intervention express fears about what could happen if there were more male educators in the ECE sector. These fears include costs to the sector, teacher standards and less job availability (Farquhar, 2012). In order to support male involvement in ECE, substantial changes are required. Many studies argue that not only must men embrace their roles as nurturers, caregivers and educators of young children, but also women must examine their own beliefs and attitudes toward men in ECE (United Nations Children’s Fund, 1995; United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women, 2003; Neugebauer, 2005). According to Piburn (2006), nurturing fathers, father figures and men who teach will sense that their ECE communities are places where their contributions are valued and the number of male staff will increase to a point where the culture of ECE is free of the biases, scrutiny and the commonly held assumptions about men that are
embedded in today’s workplace. How, then, do male early childhood educators impact on children, families, colleagues and the early childhood sector?

The implications of men in ECE: Advantages and disadvantages of increasing male early childhood educators

Children and families

Farquhar’s studies tell us that more male educators are needed in ECE as positive male figures for children in the context of the economic and social changes that have made them absent from or marginal in many children’s home lives (1997; Farquhar et al., 2006). One of the results of a national survey also demonstrates that children who have solo mothers need a male role model so that boys learn what it is to be a man and girls learn how to relate to men (Farquhar, 2012). In particular, the lack of male educators in ECE impacts negatively on boys. As research points to women favouring girls and reinforcing feminine attributes, boys may actually be currently disadvantaged (Cooney & Bittner, 2001; Farquhar, 2005). According to MacNaughton and Newman (2001), male educators can induct boys into masculinity and may help those who are lacking in positive male role models at home.

Male educators provide children with opportunities to experience different approaches to play and interactions, and are able to model behaviour that breaks through male stereotypes. A case study by Sumsion (2005) illustrates that male educators are more able to identify with and respond to boys effectively than female educators because they share an understanding of boys’ experiences and perspectives and an essential masculinity. Fisher, a head teacher at a Christchurch kindergarten, points to research that shows boys learn differently from girls. He says that male teachers might allow robust behaviour to continue a little longer than female colleagues might (NZNEON, 2007). Peeters (2007) argues that female educators are more likely to view unruly play as aggressive and have a negative impression of more masculine behaviours than male educators. Therefore, boys are positioned to be disadvantaged and marginalized educationally within the current gender imbalance in early childhood settings (Sumsion, 2005). However, critics point out that these views rely on the assumption of fundamental and essential gender differences and male educators could potentially “reinforce traditional gender stereotypes and perpetuate limiting and problematic gender-stereotyped behaviors” (Sumsion, 2005, p. 111).

Critical research studies show that more male educators in ECE could benefit both boys and girls through observing and interacting with men in a non-traditional role. Well-educated male educators could help both girls and boys construct new ideas of masculinity (Sumsion, 2005). Many researchers agree that if there are more men in early childhood settings carrying out caring roles, this could help to counter children’s sex-stereotyped views of gender roles, reduce sexism and generally advance gender equality (Farquhar et al., 2006; Marsiglio, 2009; Sumsion, 2005). The endorsement of non-traditional gender roles presumes gender equality will help children in the long run and there is longstanding international support for widening male responsibility in family life and in children’s education (Piburn, 2006). In contrast, critics of Sumsion’s study argue that learning gender involves more than a process of osmosis after
observing influential adults, and there is little insight into how children manage conflicting understandings of gender identities (2005).

Furthermore, according to Peeters’s paper, quality male educators could build a male friendly atmosphere in ECE settings (2005). Jones (2009) agrees that fathers or grandfathers would feel more comfortable about participating in ECE settings if there were more male educators who could encourage them. Farquhar et al. (2006) also support this and says that male educators provide parents with a greater choice of staff to approach and talk with. Male educators can build a rapport with fathers and provide friendship, especially to those that are single parents. This could help children and families connect their home with centres and thereby enhance children’s learning and development (Bittner & Cooney, 2003). Today, there has been a large shift in attitude among fathers; they are often more engaged in the lives of their children and this has probably helped parents and grandparents to see that having more male educators for their children is a very good thing (Farquhar, 2012).

**Colleagues and the early childhood sector**

A more diverse workforce, with men represented as well as women, is seen as being necessary to expand the quality of ECE for children and bring different viewpoints and ways of working to the ECE profession and the sector (Farquhar et al., 2006; Farquhar, 2012). Researchers argue that having more male educators will benefit the early childhood profession by enhancing the status of early childhood teaching, changing workplace dynamics for the better and improving staff interrelationships (Jensen, 1998; Lyons et al., 2003). Farquhar’s (2012) study demonstrates that male educators can bring a unique energy and perspective to centre programs and there is less gossiping or petty sniping in centres with male staff. They also contribute to bringing about more gender balance in ECE settings and a gender-fair learning environment has affirmation of a range of behaviours that are acceptable for both boys and girls (Bittner & Cooney, 2003). According to Cunningham (1999), male educators reinforce, rather that disrupt gender stereotypes in the field of education (as cited in Bittner & Cooney, 2003).

In Bittner and Cooney’s (2003) study, worthy wages for early childhood educators continues to be a pressing issue in the sector and is a barrier to hiring quality staff, both male and female. The ECE sector would be benefited by higher wages for educators because it would have more full-time qualified male educators and lower staff turnovers (Bittner & Cooney, 2003; Farquhar, 2012). By helping to create a gender fair classroom environment, providing a nurturing male role figure in centres, and pushing for better wages, male educators can contribute to overall early childhood program quality (Bittner & Cooney, 2003).

However, other researchers point out that, when men enter female dominated occupations, they maintain their traditional advantage in the workforce and rise rapidly to more highly paid administrative positions (Farquhar, 2012; Murray, 1996; Williams & Heikes, 1993). Men often have a more open and straightforward communication style than women, and workplace tensions could actually increase if men were to perpetuate the gendered power relationships or rise rapidly to management positions, which is evident in many mixed gender workplaces (Farquhar, 1997; Peeters, 2005; Sargent, 2005; Sumsion, 2005).
this context, positive effects for women of a greater male presence in ECE are likely to be minimal.

**Conclusion**

This paper critically considered the lack of men in ECE and the benefits and drawbacks of increasing male educators. Even though there are some barriers for men going into the early childhood profession, many researchers believe that more male educators would benefit young children, contribute to gender equality, improve staff dynamics in the early childhood sector, and encourage fathers to become more involved with their children’s education. When men are accepted, supported and encouraged as early childhood educators and caregivers, they will be more likely to enter and remain in ECE.

**References**


