Male workers in ECEC services: Changes in the debate?

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In 2011, the European Union Communiqué on Childcare emphasised the need for high quality early childhood services that were accessible to all, and, as part of this, that there was a "pressing need to make a career in the early childhood education and care (ECEC) sector more attractive to men in all European Union countries" (EC, 2011, p. 7). In this paper, I explore some dimensions of making the early childhood sector more attractive to male workers. I argue, using data from recent studies and what still stands as one of the most comprehensive studies of its kind, *Men in the Nursery* (Cameron et al. 1999) that the organisation and conceptualisation of practice in the early childhood sector itself is highly gendered and has had the effect of rendering male worker participation problematic. In this paper, ‘gender’ is seen, following earlier work, as a phenomenon of difference that structures individual life chances and social institutions, and as a difference that is conveyed within the structures and discourses about everyday life (Cameron & Moss, 2007).

Male worker employment in early childhood services, such as nurseries, family day care and kindergarten with young children, is still rare but is becoming, in England, and has become, in some other European countries, accepted as a means of demonstrating gender equality and resolving labour shortages (EC, 2011). The shift has taken some time. In 1996, the European Commission’s Childcare Network published a discussion document about male workers in services for young children in Europe, and put forward the same arguments that can be found in contemporary debates: male workers in a hitherto all female workplace can offer ‘something different’. The most often cited essential contribution is as a role model for children, usually boys, growing up without fathers (Jensen, 1996). The Network also argued that male workers would help address gender segregated roles within families: “measures to involve fathers more in the care of young children (seen as important for reconciling the demands of work and family life) would have little effect if no male childcare workers were employed in day-care centres” (Peeters, 2007, p.13).

But male early childhood workers also face unique criticism: they are, or can be, subject to assumptions about their motivation in working with young children, that it is not ‘normal’, and therefore not ‘natural’ to want to do so and therefore they are dangerous to young children (Cameron et al., 1999). Women workers rarely, if ever, face this criticism, reinforcing the idea of gendered roles within ‘care work’ (Cameron & Moss, 2007).
Substantive European research has drawn attention to shifts in understanding of the issue of male workers in ECEC services over the past two decades. First, there is widespread parental support for male workers. National surveys in England in 2003 and 2009 showed that over eighty percent of parents approved of male childcare workers for their children (Hinsliff, 2003; Children’s Workforce Development Council, 2009). Koch and Rohrmann (2010) found the same degree of parental support in Austria, a country with very little policy history of encouraging male workers in ECEC services. Such employment was, in fact, banned until 1980.

Second, there is little or no difference between male and female workers in their pedagogical practice (Brandes et al., 2012). Observations of male and female practitioners’ reactions to situations demonstrating empathy, challenging children and dialogical interaction showed no gender differences. This was a study of German kindergarten teachers who had completed professional training, and it is possible that the effect of professionalization was to engage critically with the idea of gendered practice and, in so doing, to have a heightened awareness of self, compared to workers with a lower level of training. However, the findings chime with those of the Cameron et al. (1999) interview study of male and female ECEC workers in England. Workers came from varied professional education backgrounds and from a prevailing cultural discourse of equality, which meant there was no difference, in theory, in the allocation of tasks between men and women. One female practitioner said: ‘equality is important for the children to witness and there should be no differences between the men and the women workers’. However, male workers in the study drew attention to some gendered expectations of them – for example, to do practical tasks around the building or to enjoy certain types of play. One male worker explained that he had a particular role in physical play:

I put myself on the floor and that’s like an open invitation to anybody to jump on you…or if I’m out in the garden and there are footballs out there…I think sometimes the children have tendency of coming to me to play those things…they invariably draw me into their game with them.

Similarly, Brandes et al. (2012) found that gender practices lie beneath the surface of professional behaviour, and become visible in relation to the gender of the child. Male workers and, to a lesser extent, female workers made choices according to their perceptions of the children: “gender only became apparent when the issue is what the professionals do with the children, to which themes and materials they incline, and which interests and inclinations of girls and boys they take up” (Brandes et al., 2012, p. 9).

If it is the case that parents largely support the employment of male workers, and there are few differences in the practice offered by male and female workers, how, then, do we account for the continuing absence of male workers in most early childhood provision?
Gendered staffing in early childhood education and care services

The gender imbalance in childcare and early years work is extreme: few occupations have fewer men. In 2011, in England, there were approximately 426,500 childcare workers (excluding teachers and assistants working with children under five in schools) (Brind et al., 2011). Within this group, there was a marked tendency for male employment in settings with older children. Male workers were more likely to be found in out of school childcare (eight percent of workers in after school clubs and ten percent in holiday playschemes) than in day nurseries or with childminders (two percent each) or in sessional playgroups (just one percent) (Brind et al., 2010). The rate is similar in the early education (schools) sector, where one percent of those working in primary schools with classes for children aged under five were male (Brind et al., 2010). There has been no increase since the 1991 census (Cameron and Moss, 1998).

The gender distribution among the early childhood workforce in other European countries is similar to that in England: there are few male workers, and those there are tend to work with older children. Denmark has a relatively high proportion of male workers, and exemplifies this trend: seven per cent of workers in centres with children under three, 11 per cent in kindergartens with children aged three-to-six-years, 24 per cent in out of school services, and 28 per cent in leisure time centres (Jensen, 2010; Oberhuemer et al., 2010, p. 506). These figures include bachelor degree level qualified pedagogues and assistants with a lower level qualification or none. The proportion of male pedagogues (those with a bachelor degree) working in centres for children under three is just two percent (Jensen, 2010). In Germany, around three percent of workers are male (Friedmann, 2012) and in Austria, it is one percent (Koch & Rohrmann, 2010). Recruitment campaigns in Denmark have had some effect at improving the proportion of male students: 25 per cent of Danish pedagogue students are male; but this training is at a higher level than in England (bachelor degree) and equips the graduates to work across a wide range of settings with children, young people and adults, not just in early childhood (Jensen, 2010). In Norway, sustained networking, support and targeted recruitment made few inroads on the national target figure of 20 percent male childcare workers: the proportion of male workers in kindergartens rose only marginally, from 6.2 percent in 2004, to 7.6 percent in 2008 (Johannesen & Hoel, 2010). In this study, male workers were more likely to be assistants (60 percent of all male workers) and teachers (20 percent) than managers (10 percent) and bilingual assistants (1.6 percent). Where there was a male manager, recruiting additional men was easier. Three times as many men were employed in kindergartens with male managers as those without (Johannesen & Hoel, 2010). It seems clear that, across Europe, where data is available, there are few male workers in relation to females, although absolute numbers have been growing with expansion of the early childhood sector as a whole. This is particularly the case for work with children under three years of age.

Explanations for the relative absence of male workers

Little is known about why men prefer to work in out of school childcare compared with services for very young children. Possibilities are that there is a
more attractive, higher, hourly rate of pay for these services; that sessional hours after school suit the individuals concerned; or that male workers prefer working with older children. Processes of professionalization in themselves do not appear to change the gender balance greatly: Denmark has highly developed educational programmes for ECEC workers and good levels of pay, but only seven percent of workers in settings for children under three are male, far fewer than with older age groups of children where as much as a quarter of the workforce is male. Scotland, with a targeted recruitment and support campaign involving men only training, but no change to the level at which training is pitched or the salary, has achieved, at least in the capital city, 12 percent male childcare workers (Spence, 2011).

A more likely explanation lies in the gendering of the work. Historically, care work, and to a lesser extent education work, has been considered ‘women’s work’, or even, in its emulation of mothering, ‘mother care’ (Cameron & Moss, 2007). Care work with the very youngest children is conceptualised as taking place when mothers are not present and is moulded on the physical environment and daily routines of ‘home’. It is, in a sense, ‘replacing’ the work of mothers, and fathers are largely invisible in the world of children and their care. There is, in this formulation, no conceptual space for male workers. Cameron et al. (1999) explored this through interviews with eleven men and ten women participants working in ECEC settings with children under three years of age in England, and interviews with 77 parents of children attending the same settings (hereafter ‘childcare centres’). The study aimed to investigate the ‘different perspective’ brought by male and female workers alluded to in Jensen’s 1996 discussion document. Beyond this, analysis of the interviews developed a concern with the ways in which organisation of practice was itself gendered. In Acker’s (1991) terms, the institutionalised assumptions about practice were, over time, defined by the majority (female) gender. What did this mean for male entrants, the roles that could be adopted and the contribution to knowledge that could be made? Space precludes a more extensive discussion of the findings of this study; here I will focus on the discussion of the workers’ place and role.

**Men as visible**

Male workers in early childhood education and care settings were highly visible because they were so unusual. Being in a minority of one or two among a staff group of twenty or more female workers could lead to them being, as one male worker said, cast in extreme terms:

> I think men get stereotyped quite easily in [early childhood] settings and I think if you’re seen as being quite sort of attractive, it … creates a bit of a buzz … and if you’re not … it’s almost as if, you’re a useless man, sort of ‘what does he know’.

Stereotyping men into polarized visions of ‘maleness’ meant men were open to scrutiny because of their novelty, scrutiny on women’s terms, as well as scrutiny in terms of their performance as workers. This might be pejorative scrutiny, or, alternatively, male workers could become confident about their gender difference and interpret it constructively. A male worker from a centre specialising in addressing specific emotional difficulties in children argued that employing men to work with a child who had had negative, perhaps harmful,
experiences of men ‘has got to evoke a response. I would hope to offer a
different picture’ of being a man. Being visible was constructed by this male
worker as a positive contrast to other ways of being male that children may have
witnessed. Offering a ‘different picture’ can then be shared knowledge and
opened to discussion among the staff group. Male workers can offer an added
dimension to staff dynamics: their difference can prompt new ways of working
with children or new perspectives for staff discussions about children’s
experiences within the setting.

**Difference or no difference?**

As reported above, the predominant line of thinking among staff interviewed was
that there was no difference between the tasks and roles of male and female
workers. Equality of opportunity was interpreted as everyone doing the ‘same’
as each other while ‘difference’ was potentially in tension with the quest for
gender equality (Cameron et al., 1999). If there were different expectations of
male and female workers, these tended to be expressed as ‘natural’ or individual
differences, as in the words of this male worker, ‘I think it all boils down to how
good the person is as a person really’ and this female worker: ‘I’m very much
into an individual person and their individual needs’. In terms of generating
shared knowledge about working with young children, conceptualising difference
on an individual rather than a gender category level risks rendering invisible
gendered assumptions about the experiences and skills of men and women (or
boys and girls).

Differences of expectation were apparent in the ways male workers reflected on
their practice. They said they were asked and sometimes expected to do
practical jobs around the building, such as fixing things and changing light bulbs,
as this was ‘naturally’ something they were good at. It was easy, despite the
discourse of equality and sameness, to invoke individual skill at tasks that were
‘naturally’ the province of one gender or the other. But awareness of gendered
expectations did not always lead to following them through. One male worker
said he was conscious of reacting against performing in a stereotyped ‘male’
way:

[I am] aware of situations where men have functioned in a
completely different way with children...when they're out in the
garden, it's the men that are kicking the ball about and running up
and down with it...and I've consciously tried to prevent myself
getting sucked into that.

In this study, it appeared that underlying gender divisions existed in childcare
practice. These were largely unarticulated and stemmed from predominant ideas
about domestic divisions of labour, with male workers positioned as performing
stereotypes of male tasks in families. Faced with this set of expectations about
gendered work, male childcare workers adopted two broad strategies: they
either integrated themselves into the model and, as one said: ‘we all do the
same’, quickly followed by ‘I do change the light bulbs’; or consciously set
themselves apart by rejecting ‘traditional’ or ‘normative’ approaches to male and
female difference. As in Brandes et al.’s (2012) study, gendered practice lay
beneath the surface of professional practice, and beneath the predominant
thinking about gender equality. Articulating differences or assumptions of
differences might be made visible through discursive analysis of practice among the team, but, in the centres visited, there appeared to be few opportunities for critical reflections on men’s (or women’s) roles or experiences. For example, staff meetings were about planning and practical arrangements, rather than pedagogic differences.

**Marginalisation**

Male workers’ experience was often one of marginalisation within childcare centres, similar to the position of ‘otherness’ reported elsewhere (King, 1998; Sumison, 2000). In conceptualising gender difference as ‘sameness’, and in constructing gender difference as opaque in comparison to ‘individual’ difference, some male workers felt excluded. This was vividly reported in comments male workers made about staff room conversations, where, as one male worker said, ‘sometimes I simply can’t grasp what they are talking about’. A female worker confirmed this marginalisation of male workers in staff room conversations when she said ‘you do get less personal with a man sitting there’. Men’s sense of marginalisation is not necessarily structural: they can and do still progress to managerial roles in early childhood settings. Moreover, it is open to change. Management and staff team practices, such as being open to reflective discussion about gendered roles and expectations, can have an impact on how marginalised (or not) male workers feel.

Being marginalised is not just a product of holding a minority gender status. Gendered ways of working are embedded in the way work with young children is conceptualised and carried out (Cameron et al., 1999). More specifically, as noted above, work with children under three is threaded with ideas about caring as substitute motherhood and male workers have to negotiate their position within this predominant ideology. They can either conform to so-called natural gender divisions or they have to strike out and develop a new gender identity. One dilemma for male workers is that, often, female workers like the idea of male workers performing stereotypical ‘male’ functions, such as practical work and outdoor play, but the very male workers who are attracted to working with young children may have already decided such interpretations about ‘being male’ are not for them. At the same time, there is no conceptual model of ‘father’ within childcare centres to formulate an idea of how to practice as a male worker (Peeters, 2007). There was no evidence at the time of the study that such sensitive issues as gender roles and status were publicly debated. Male workers had to decide for themselves, reinforcing the idea that men’s place within ECEC settings is marginal.

**Role models: A unique role for men?**

Being a male role model is the most frequently expressed contribution male childcare workers make to ECEC (Jensen, 1996; Rolfe, 2005; Sargent, 2005; Jones, n.d.; Koch & Rohrmann, 2010). However, gender role models, based on the idea of adult transmission of desirable values and ways of being, are not necessarily effective (Gold & Reis, 1982). Nor is the application in relation to early childhood services always clear (Sargent, 2005, p. 254). Sargent (2005) noted three interpretations: being a living model of traditional masculinity; an
embodiment of discipline; and representing an alternative, gentler form of masculinity than girls had witnessed at home.

Exploring the question of what sorts of roles workers model in ECEC settings, Cameron et al. (1999) found that female and male workers gave rather different responses. Female workers were clear they were modelling professionalism, by which they meant setting standards of social relations through their use of language and behaviour to which they would like children and/or parents to aspire (Cameron et al., 1999, p. 84). Male workers, on the other hand, were more divided. About half of those interviewed interpreted modelling as demonstrating aspects of their personal self, such as truthfulness and ‘good moral values’ and their characteristics such as being ‘loud’ and ‘affectionate’. One man said, ‘I’m not trying to fill a gap. I’m just a nice man who works in the family centre’.

Other male workers saw the task of modelling being given to them because of their gender, for example, when a man was asked to take a particular interest in talking to boys from lone mother households. He attributed this to ‘just more of that role model pulling through’. These are perhaps somewhat passive interpretations of being a role model – just ‘being there and being male’. One man drew attention to male workers’ potential role as a substitution for trustworthy familial figures in children’s lives when he said, ‘I may be the first man a child can trust’. This more active interpretation of male role models is largely as a substitute father. Using visible gender difference to approximate familial figures is thought valuable for children in roughly similar ways to the use of female workers as substitute mothers, although, as previously argued, there is no explicit ‘father’ model on which to draw.

However, one male worker rejected ascribed definitions of ‘being male’ to articulate his role modelling. He said:

I’d like to think that I’m a role model that questions the way men have to be…but I don’t consciously go out to do that, maybe I’m rejecting the old sort of stereotypes and role models that I had…by default that means I am something else…so many times the [children, parents, staff] say ‘oh, men can’t do that’ and I’ll say ‘well that’s just your experience of a man, you can’t say all men are like that’…I challenge them every time they say it.

This worker’s sense of self was regularly challenged by recourse to ‘traditional’ ideas of ‘what men do’ around children, as articulated by children, parents and colleagues. His awareness of the different ‘old’ and ‘alternative’ possibilities of role models conveys the dilemma of the multiple ways of being male in a care work role, shaped, largely, by the gendered assumptions held in the cultural environment; his way of being was only marked out because it ran contrary to others’ notions of acceptability. He was ‘other’.

In this study, there were three interpretations of being a male role model: a passive ‘being male’; an active construction of familial models of trustworthy fathering; and an active challenge to stereotypes of the way men ‘have to be’. This raises the question of the sort of male role model that is ideally wanted within ECEC settings, and whether any one or two male workers can embody all
the different possibilities of maleness, to be a universal, all-purpose, comprehensive model of being a man.

The idea of role models is also potentially problematic because it conceptualises children as largely passive receivers of transmitted values and knowledge. An alternative perspective is to see children and workers as constructing knowledge together, learning from each other (Rinaldi 2005), in which case the role model is one of providing resources for children to make their own discoveries and identities. Here, the outcome of the role model is not to be like the adult, but is much less predictable.

‘Difference’ and ‘quality’: Contributions from a mixed gender perspective

In the data discussed above, I have argued that the place of, and conceptual space for, male workers is circumscribed, hedged by largely unvoiced expectations and assumptions, sometimes marginalised and often confused beneath an overarching paradigm for ECEC work with the youngest children that is constructed as ‘care.’ In turn, this has been defined by culturally specific ideas about what mothering and ‘women’s work’ looks like. The organisation of practice, in other words, of educating and caring for young children, is itself gendered, and the ways in which individual male and female workers ‘do’ gender are subtle in this wider ideological context. But this does not mean there is no place for a mixed gender workforce in ECEC. Rather, the challenge is to reconfigure early childhood education and care to be sensitive to gendered practices and ideas, in order to reflect multiple gender identities in contemporary societies. As ECEC becomes a universal service, and, in some countries, an entitlement, there is a need to confront labour shortages within the early childhood workforce and to offer high quality services for all children, regardless of their diverse backgrounds. Recruiting only from female labour sources restricts policy objectives to expand ECEC provision and, at the same time, restricts what is on offer to historically bound gendered notions of ‘care’.

One way is to redefine practice as ‘pedagogic’ rather than ‘care’. Following the distinction made in the Starting Strong reports (OECD, 2001; 2006), a pedagogic approach is a holistic, child-centred and learning-oriented tradition that embraces children’s risk taking and values self-expression, common in Nordic countries (Jensen, 2011). A ‘care’ orientation, is mostly concerned with adults ‘looking after’ children, especially their bodily health and well-being, in early childhood settings (Bennett, 2006; Jensen, 2011). Under a (Nordic) pedagogic approach, dialogue among staff to critically analyse practice is common, through which gendered assumptions and practices might become more visible and the various ways of ‘being male’ could be articulated, giving room for conceptual development of male workers’ ‘difference’.

Emilsen and Koch (2010) draw attention to the potential of outdoor work as a means of both recruiting male workers into ECEC settings and of re-defining quality practice. They argue that male workers who work in settings with opportunities to go outdoors “feel more freedom to work with children in their own way, without the tradition of caring in a ‘mother’s home’” (Emilsen & Koch, 2010, p. 551). The possibility to redefine practice with less ‘mother care’ and more of a masculine image exists when practice is relocated outdoors. This
approach holds promise, in that extending early childhood practice to include working outdoors routinely may offer an opportunity to be more physically active, expressive and dynamic; but equating working outdoors with maleness runs the risk of essentialising gendered practice and dividing male from female spheres within ECEC work. Nor is there any necessary relationship between physical location (in/out doors) and style of practice (more/less physical or expressive). Jensen (2011) discusses the high value attached to outdoor practice in Danish early childhood education and care, which is seen as a means by which children can learn through having freedom to roam. Valuing physically expressive practice was not developed from a perspective of addressing male recruitment, but from a children's learning perspective, and was largely put in place by a female workforce. Similarly, Jensen points out that, in other countries, such as Hungary and England, much more ordered 'school' or 'home like' notions of being outdoors exist, again not developed in relation to male or female recruitment.

Conclusion

Over the period of the 1990s – 2010s, the policy environment for employment of male workers has shifted. In surveys, parents support male worker participation and discourses of gender equality have become predominant in ECEC practice. In 2010, the German government financed a major recruitment programme, designed to increase the proportion of male workers in ECEC services, using public relations and information, advice, networking, and by supporting practice. Through doing so, the aim was to “expand traditional conceptions of gender roles: caring, comforting and nurturing should be seen as masculine as well as feminine traits” (Cremers & Krabel, 2010, para. 5). There is now an international network for research and development in the field of men in early childhood education and care (Rohrmann, 2013). The Men in Childcare Scotland group have successfully trained and supported over 1,200 men since 2001, making a considerable difference to the possibility of male employment in local ECEC services. The rationale offered for recruiting male workers has changed little, although more weight is now placed on labour market needs, especially in countries undergoing expansion of services. The idea of role models and male workers offering something different remains important.

Despite this favourable climate, the proportions of male workers remain negligible, and less than ten percent in all countries for which data is available. Beyond very real structural constraints around ECEC pay and status, which affect all workers, there appear to be two sticking points that inhibit growth of male recruits to ECEC. The first is an ambivalence about gendered practice versus gender equality. There appears to be a discomfort with gendered practice that marks visible males as different, for this essentialises on the basis of gender, rather than acknowledging more multi-faceted constructions of practice. The higher order value is gender equality, which easily translates into sameness, rather than articulating and valuing difference and diversity. The exception is valuing role models of ‘being male,’ but the data presented here demonstrated the difficulty with a homogenous definition of ‘maleness’. The second and overarching point is about ideologies of ‘care’, which are still associated with orderliness, domesticity and ‘mother care’, in which male workers have to negotiate their place. Where the conceptualisation and
organisation of ECEC is less focused on (mother) ‘care’ and more on pedagogic values, there is more potential for recruitment of male workers to flourish.

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