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Men in Early Childhood Education and Care

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CONTENTS

An Roinn Leanaí, Comhionannais, Míchumais, Lánpháirtíochta agus Óige
Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth

pobal
government supporting communities

Men in Early Childhood Education and Care

Editorial

In Ireland, there has been rapid development across all areas of the early childhood education and care (ECEC) sector over the past two decades, with a four-fold increase in the number of educators in the sector. The workforce remains, however, predominantly female, with the percentage of male ECEC educators only around 2%. This gender imbalance can also be seen across the US and the UK, and in most EU countries. The low proportion of male employees in professional care and education for the youngest children has been on the international agenda for decades, but little seems to have changed. But, why is this?

First, although there have been sustained efforts to improve gender equality and eliminate widespread gender stereotypes in all areas of society for many years, even today we are bombarded with gendered messages, including that of women as having a more caring nature and being better suited to caring roles.

Second, there is the issue of the generally low status and wages of the ECEC profession, often consisting of part time hours. The role of ECEC educator may not be seen to be a viable option for men, with the income judged insufficient for the 'main breadwinner' to sustain a family. The profession is widely perceived as more suited to women, who traditionally have combined their parenting roles with part-time employment.

Other barriers cited as preventing men entering the sector include fear of or actual judgements of their sexuality, motives, and ability to care for young children.

From a practical point of view, at a time when staff recruitment is an issue across the sector, it makes sense to widen the potential workforce, making ECEC a more visible career option for all. More gender balance in the workforce could have a positive impact on staff teams, affecting everyday practices. Improved gender balance in ECEC would also be beneficial for children, offering them an environment that is more representative of society in general. The absence of male role models in early years settings, and a lack of opportunity to interact with and build relationships with men outside their home and extended family, at a time when children are developing a sense of identity in relation to others, helps to reinforce gender stereotypes of women as more suited to such professions.

The most important consideration in recruitment of course is that, during these formative years for children, those employed in ECEC – both male and female – have the knowledge, skills and aptitude to provide quality care and education that supports young children's holistic development. Broadening the potential workforce increases the chances of recruiting the best person for the job.

In this issue of *ChildLinks*, academics and educators from across Ireland, the UK, the EU and Australia consider the issue of gender imbalance in the ECEC workforce and examine the challenges for men entering the profession. They also explore how the issue is being addressed internationally, both to raise awareness and to employ practical strategies to recruit and retain more men into the sector.

Sinéad Kanton

MEN IN ECEC IN IRELAND:
DIVERSIFYING THE WORKFORCE

Dr Joanne McHale,
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Introduction

The early childhood education and care (ECEC) context in Ireland has undergone considerable change, developing rapidly since the mid-1990s. The workforce has increased from 7,560 in 2000 (Area Development Management, 2000) to approximately 26,200 working directly with children (Pobal, 2022). The ECEC workforce is a woman majority occupation (Schaub, 2015). While many care and education professions consist of a disproportionate number of women, ECEC arguably has the highest. While the number of men in the sector has also increased, what has remained relatively static is the proportion of men to women, which sits around 2% (Pobal, 2022). This number reflects the international context where numbers range from 1.5% to 9%. England, Ireland and the US come in low whereas Turkey and Norway sit on the upper end of the scale with 6% and 9% respectively (Rohrmann, Brody & Plaisir, 2021). Internationally across OECD countries, the ECEC workforce sits at 97% women (Government of Ireland, 2021).

Policy Landscape

The lack of men in the sector has not gone unnoticed. In 1996, the *European Commission Network on Childcare and Other Measures to Reconcile Employment and Family Responsibilities of Men and Women* recommended a target of 20%, one which was reiterated by the Expert Working Group on Childcare in 1999 (Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform, 1999). In 2011, the *Competence Requirements for Early Childhood Education and Care* [CoRe] Report made a more conservative recommendation of 10% (Urban et al., 2011). While the need to address the imbalance has been noted (National Economic and Social Forum, 2005; Office of the Minister for Children, 2006; Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2016), few targeted actions have been taken to achieve this in Ireland. However, more recent developments offer some hope that this may begin to be addressed in a more targeted way.

First 5: The Whole of Government Strategy for Babies Children and their Families stated goals for 'a well-functioning early childhood system' which includes 'an appropriately skilled and sustainable professional workforce that is supported and valued and reflects the diversity of babies, young children and their families' (Government of Ireland, 2018). Stemming from this, *Nurturing Skills*: *The Workforce Plan for Early Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare 2022-2028* was published in late 2021, citing a vision for a "well-qualified, skilled, diverse and valued professional workforce," (Government of Ireland, 2021, p.8). The Workforce Plan places particular focus on recruitment and retention, including a stated action to target under-represented groups in order to diversify the workforce. At European level, the ET2020 Working Group on Early Childhood Education and Care published its final report: *How to Recruit, Train and Motivate Well Qualified Staff* in 2020 (EU Commission, 2021) and made recommendations on the gender diversification of the workforce.

One of the challenges currently facing the ECEC sector is staff recruitment and retention with turnover at 19% and 49% of services reporting recruitment challenges (Pobal, 2022). Issues of pay, conditions and recognition of the work, qualifications and progression opportunities have been reported generally (Government of Ireland, 2021) though actions are being taken to address this through the Workforce Plan and the recent Employment Regulation Order (Irish Statute Book, 2022). At a time when recruitment and retention are problematic, it seems reasonable to consider more than just potential female candidates, and addressing the issues outlined above may make the profession more appealing to men as well as women. However, before targets can be made and actions taken to address gender diversity, it will be important to consider other factors that influence men's participation in the ECEC workforce.

Why So Few Men?

The reasons there are so few men in ECEC are complex. In the first instance, despite many changes in Irish society and efforts to increase gender equality, many roles and expectations of what men and women do are still ingrained (Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, 2021). Men are seen as breadwinners with women considered natural carers. Children pick up these messages very early on through what they see men and women do in the environment, how media portrays men and women's roles, gender roles in books and toys, the clothes that are marketed to children and the way in which children are treated (Cartei et al., 2020; Chambers et al., 2018; Haywood & Adzajlic, 2023; Karunanayake & Vimukthi, 2020; del Río & Strasser, 2013). For example, boys are often encouraged with engineering type activities developing their spatial awareness and girls are given activities and toys related to appearance or care (Haywood & Adzajlic, 2023). While many ECEC environments are very aware of the hidden curriculum and work hard to create gender neutral and equitable access, the wider environment continues to bombard children with gendered messages, including that of an all-female ECEC staff. There is some evidence that men are having greater involvement with their children in the home and indeed, *First 5* provides acknowledgement of the need for more equitable leave entitlements to allow both parents to share responsibility for their children (Government of Ireland, 2018). However, research would suggest that the greater caring responsibility still falls to mothers (Russell et al., 2019; DCEDIY, 2021). With the ECEC and primary teaching workforce women majority occupations, this means that by the time children get to secondary school and are beginning to consider potential careers, boys are rarely aware of ECEC as an option. Added to this, subject choice in secondary school is often along gendered lines (Lynch & Feeley, 2009). A focus group with careers teachers has indicated that ECEC is rarely presented as an option in careers guidance. When it is, it is usually because a student has expressed an interest. These students are predominantly girls. Where boys do consider ECEC, it can often be as a stepping stone to another career such as primary teaching (McHale, 2022). As a result, the vast majority of those taking up ECEC as a career option are women.

Secondary to this, and almost always the most often suggested reason, is the status and pay of the role. Many ECEC educators work 38 weeks and / or fewer than 20 hours per week (Pobal, 2022). This is generally

not seen as an income that would sustain a family and is therefore perceived as more suited to women who traditionally have combined their parenting roles with part-time employment (Brody, 2014; Cameron et al., 1999; Cremers et al., 2010; Fine-Davis et al., 2005; Rolfe, 2005; Rubery & Hebson, 2018). The short-term, lower income nature of the role is seen as a deterrent to men who would expect to earn a better income. Care professions are notoriously gendered and undervalued for the essential work that is carried out (Hanlon, 2011; Lynch & Feeley, 2009; The Citizen's Assembly, 2021). This was never more obvious than during the recent covid-19 pandemic. It has also historically not been seen as a professional role and despite the increasing number of graduates now in the sector, it does not yet receive the same recognition as primary and secondary education. However, this has been acknowledged in the Workforce Plan and with the establishment of an Employment Regulation Order putting salaries and role profiles on a legal footing (Government of Ireland, 2021; Irish Statue Book, 2022). Progress has been made, but with more to do.

Why Do We Need More Men?

A number of discourses arise when considering the role of men in ECEC. While well-intentioned, some have inherent flaws. For example, one argument concerns the notion that having men in the ECEC setting would provide for complementarity with women; as they would each have different strengths, they could complement each other's roles. The issue with this argument is it may be taken to imply that there are different roles for men and for women, reinforcing society's heteronormative gendered roles and stereotypes (Warin et al., 2020). However, it would be foolish to overlook the fact that because men and women have likely grown up in a gendered society and had gendered experiences, they may be inclined to fall into traditional gendered roles and therefore reinforce the stereotypes. A second and very prevalent argument for increasing the number of men in ECEC is the notion that men should be role models and in particular role models for boys, especially if children are coming from households where there is no male figure. This is also problematic. Again, it suggests that men and women have specific roles and children who do not have access to a male role model in the home are therefore at a disadvantage. It also creates unrealistic expectations of men's roles in the setting (Warin, 2019).

There are, however, reasons why more men in ECEC would be advantageous to children, to the men themselves, to the profession and to society in general. At a time when there are recruitment challenges in ECEC, drawing from the totality of the potential workforce and not just women, would have potential to increase recruitment. This is not to imply that new professionals be recruited just because they are men, we must ensure we are recruiting the right people for the job, but making it a visible option. Having men and women working side by side in ECEC would ensure an environment that is representative of society in general (and similar arguments can be presented about cultural diversity in the ECEC workforce). This can help to challenge stereotypes of what men and women do, though we must be careful to ensure that men and women take on all roles in the setting and do not fall into gendered patterns, as has been evidenced by Warin et al. (2020).

What Are the Factors Influencing Men's Trajectories in ECEC?

It is not sufficient to just recruit men; there needs to be consistent effort to retain them. Some of these retention efforts also apply to women and it would be counterproductive to put considerable resources into retaining men and not also trying to retain women. However, due to their minority status and existing gendered understandings, men's experiences in the ECEC setting often differ and can impact their likelihood of staying long term. These need to be considered in both recruitment and retention. Recent research (McHale, 2022) has found:

- Many men come to early childhood as a change in career. In particular, economic factors which impact male dominated sectors (e.g. the recession starting in 2007-2008), can cause a shift in employment patterns. Men who previously were unaware of ECEC as a career option found themselves considering new directions.
- Boys had little knowledge of ECEC as a career but many of the participants of the research were encouraged to join or stay once they had a taste of the role. For this reason, having opportunities for boys and girls in secondary school to try out non-typical occupations may make ECEC more visible to men as a career option. This would complement the efforts encouraging girls to engage with STEM.
- Family members were a source of encouragement though some men received less encouraging comments from friends, linked to gendered assumptions of men's and women's roles.

Along with the issues of visibility and recruitment, men's experiences as minority members of a female majority occupation, need to be considered.

- Men reported overwhelmingly positive experiences. Most had a sense of pride and satisfaction in their work.
- However, many of them also had at least one stand-out negative experience that had an impact on their professional confidence. Some reported their practice being undermined by colleagues, the scope of their roles limited by their manager, or adverse reactions from parents or guardians. Support mechanisms during this time were key. In particular, supportive leadership and networks such as *Men in Childcare*.
- They also experienced gendered expectations such as DIY, heavy lifting, and outdoor or physical play with children. In some cases, they embraced these expectations and in others, they rejected them.
- Some men reported that they were overlooked by guardians in favour of a female colleague to discuss issues relating to their children or addressed as the manager in the assumption that they were not working directly with the children.
- Different types of practice were reported which may be a result of previously gendered experiences, but equally a flexibility in practice provided for a positive working environment.
- One common important factor was the support of leadership in their organisations. A supportive leader who recognised their unique experience and supported them was identified as having a significant positive impact.

What Are the Perspectives of Female ECEC Educators and Parents?

Responses from female educators and parents have reflected men's reported experiences. Many parents indicated that women and men were equally able to care for, play with, and support the development of children under six and most were mostly positive about the idea of a mixed gender workforce. However, some parents indicated reticence about men's involvement in intimate care with young children, suggesting that there is still a sense that it is natural for a woman but not so for a man. This is a recurring discourse in the literature relating to men working in ECEC (Cameron, 2001; Eidevald et al., 2018; Gulbranson, 2012; Woltrung, 2012). Issues of safeguarding of children should be the forefront of practice regardless of gender, and well-developed policies and witnessing practices should be in place. Female educators reported positive experiences of working in a mixed gender team but acknowledged that their male colleagues may sometimes be excluded from 'women's' conversations or undermined by their colleagues taking over certain tasks or responsibilities (McHale, 2022).

Recommendations from the Research

Taking consideration of the existing literature and the current research, the following recommendations are made in response to the issue of gender diversity in the ECEC workforce:

- Address the visibility of ECEC as a potential career option. Boys and girls in secondary school should be encouraged to try out non-typical placements during Transition and 5th Years in order to see possibilities they may otherwise overlook. Getting a 'taste' of the profession was a positive factor in encouraging men into ECEC.
- Provide opportunities and financial support for men (and women) who wish to re-train in ECEC.
- Avoid the depiction of gender stereotypes in promotional materials about careers in ECEC. Men and women should be shown doing all types of work within the setting.
- Challenge the gendered messages that children and adults receive, in the longer term and on a wider societal level, to ensure they look beyond the binary nature of gender and gender roles. Improving the diversity of the workforce and the range of adults they see in all types of roles during their formative education will help to challenge these gendered messages.
- Improve the recognition of the professional nature of the sector, with commensurate terms and conditions to make it more a more attractive profession for both men and women, as was identified in the Workforce Plan (Government of Ireland, 2021).

- Develop gender sensitive leadership practices (Eidevald et al., 2021; Ljunggren et al., 2021; Warin et al., 2020; Xu, 2021). Until such a time as gender diversity is more typical, it is important to recognise that by their unique minority status, their experiences can be different and they may fall / be expected to fall into traditional gender roles. Leaders who recognise these issues, and who can support men and women to navigate them, will be significant factors in retention. We must remain aware, sensitive and vigilant to the experiences of men and gendered expectations.
- Develop professional mentorship and reflective practices. Ongoing discussions should form a part of practice in any setting to ensure men and women are continuously gender-aware and actively working to challenge bias and stereotypes (regardless of whether there are men in the service or not).
- Maintain a commitment to undertake the actions necessary to drive the aforementioned changes and recommendations. Without such focus, no traction will be gained.

Conclusion

We still live in a gendered world where expectations and stereotypes of men and women prevail. Caring professions have typically been considered women's work, compatible with child-rearing in the home. Despite some shifts in domestic responsibilities, care professions and in particular ECEC remain women majority occupations. Men in ECEC are often highly valued and experience high levels of job satisfaction but they can also experience differential treatment and gendered expectations. With the continued professionalisation of the ECEC sector and increasing regulation and commitments in the Workforce Plan, the issue of men in ECEC should form part of the discourse. This should be followed by practical strategies for making ECEC a more visible occupation for men. However, having gender-sensitive policies, practices and leadership are necessary to ensure a more balanced workforce representative of society as whole, one which does not become a microcosm of gender stereotypes but rather challenges them so that children can see that all genders can and should have access to all opportunities.

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Further information and guidance on this topic can be found:

- The Irish Men in Childcare Network information is hosted on the National Childhood Network website: https://ncn.ie/men-in-childcare/
- MITEY (Men in the Early Years) has been active in promoting men in ECEC with annual conferences and their website has a number or resources and networking information (https://miteyuk.org/).
- The GenderEYE project developed by researchers at Lancaster University in partnership with The Fatherhood Institute conducted research and has developed a report and toolkit to support the diversification of the ECEC workforce (https://gendereye.wordpress.com/outputs/report-and-toolkit/) .
- Recent International Collaboration featuring men in ECEC from Ireland: Brody, D.L., Emilsen, K., Rohrmann, T. and Warin, J. (2021) (Eds.) *Exploring Career Trajectories of Men in the Early Childhood Education and Care Workforce.* Abingdon, Oxon: New York, NY: Routledge, 2021. Routledge https://www.routledge.com/Exploring-Career-Trajectories-of-Men-in-the-Early-Childhood-Education-and/Brody-Emilsen-Rohrmann-Warin/p/book/9780367500016
- The European Early Childhood Research Association have a Gender Balance Special Interest Group (SIG) which provides an international network for people interested in gender diversity in the ECEC workforce. Details can be found here: https://www.eecera.org/sig/gender-balance/
- The ET2020 Working Group Report *How to Recruit, Train and Motivate Well-Qualified Staff (EU Commission, 2020)* offers examples of mentorship and support programmes in member countries https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/308643fa-678c-11eb-aeb5-01aa75ed71a1/language-en/format-PDF/source-190311702

More Men Wanted!
Discourses on Men in the ECEC Workforce Between Research, Practice and Policy Development

Prof. Kari Emilsen, Queen Maud University College of Early Childhood Education, Norway; Prof. Dr. Tim Rohrmann, University of Applied Sciences and Arts, Hildesheim, Germany

More Men in ECEC – Why?

The low proportion of male employees in professional care and education for the youngest children has been on the international agenda for decades. In the 1990s, a target of 20 percent men among the educational staff in kindergartens was formulated (European Commission Network, 1996). Since then, including men in the workforce has been recognised as a central issue in meeting the policy goals of providing qualified care and learning for the youngest members of society. Highlighting the critical need for men's participation in the field is also relevant for achieving equality in a democratic society. One of the measures identified in a recent OECD guide on recruiting qualified professional workers is to encourage men to study and work in early childhood education and care (OECD, 2019, p. 20). However, women still statistically dominate the ECEC workforce worldwide, and dropout rates among male early childhood education and care (ECEC) workers, in general, are high (Brody et al., 2021).

In contrast to the assumption that the lack of male workers is caused by the generally low status and wages in the field, research reveals a much more complex set of reasons for gendered differences in the workforce. Attitudes towards male workers and even strategies for increasing the participation of men are often rooted in various and contradictory assumptions about the 'nature' of men and women, and their role in children's gendered development (Rohrmann, 2020). Although ECEC stakeholders in many countries generally favour more men in the sector, childcare is still considered as 'woman's work' in the wider community. Male workers often report subtle and sometimes open discrimination in the workplace because of their gender (Murray, 1997; Thorpe et al., 2020). Research shows that men's exit from the ECEC workforce is often associated with experiences of feeling 'other', followed by judgements of men's sexuality, motives, and ability (Sullivan et al., 2023). Often, men must negotiate and defend their masculine identity or "being a man", especially in professions with few men (Brody, 2014; Koch & Farquhar, 2015; Tennhoff et al., 2015). Warin (2018) points out that men often feel a need to "create their place" in ECEC to a greater extent than women. They often balance between traditional stereotyped expectations of them as men and established expectations for professional practice.

On different levels, relevant issues in ECEC need to be investigated from a gender perspective. On an individual level, it is vital to understand the impact of adults' sex/gender on children's development and well-being, and on the welfare of staff members. On team and organisational level, it is essential to understand how gender imbalance among the staff affects power relations and everyday practices in ECEC institutions. Rohrmann (2020) holds that gender-mixed teams in ECEC institutions need gender-conscious reflection and ongoing development of gender-sensitive pedagogy. On a societal level, the role of ECEC as a virtual arena for developing gender equality should be debated. The issue of more men in ECEC must be embedded in a discourse on gender equality in broader society.

Policies and Actions for More Men in the ECEC Workforce

Recruiting and maintaining men in the ECEC settings and professional training is a global challenge and essential for professional childcare. National and international institutions have repeatedly stated a need for more men in ECEC in the context of a diverse and well-qualified workforce (e.g. European Commission, 2011; OECD, 2019). Subsequently, some European governments implemented measures to attract more men. During the past two decades, governmental funded programmes were conducted in several countries.

Norway has been in front with a series of action plans aimed at closing the gender gap in the ECEC work force in the years 2001 to 2014, resulting in a high percentage of male workers (10%) compared to other countries (Peeters et al., 2015; Emilsen et al., 2023). Since then, other issues of gender diversity came to the foreground, and projects for more men were not continued (Emilsen et al., 2022). However, Norway is still referred to as best a practice example (OECD, 2019).

In Scotland, the project Men in Childcare started to recruit men into childcare two decades ago. Since then, courses for men in childcare have been continuously conducted with governmental and regional support. Recent Action Plans for gender equality include the aims of increasing the number of men in the educational workforce and promoting gender diversity at all levels of education including the early learning and childcare (ELC) sectors (Scottish Government 2019; Xu et al., 2022).

In Germany, a model programme for more men in ECEC with 16 regional projects (2010-2013) has yielded good results. The projects included a wide range of strategies and measures for attracting and retaining men in the field, supporting gender-mixed teams, and developing gender sensitive education. Numbers and proportion of male workers are constantly rising, to 8% and more than 50.000 men in 2022 (Rohrmann, 2016, 2020; Rohrmann et al., 2023). Governmental funded projects were also conducted in Denmark (Wohlgemuth & Hviid, 2016) and Luxembourg (Krabel et al., 2018).

Even in countries with such projects, the proportion of men in the ECEC work force remains relatively low. In many other countries male childcare workers are still a very small minority. Moreover, even if governments, professionals, and parents are generally positive towards more men in ECEC, arguments for the involvement of men differ widely, and are sometimes quite controversial. International research sheds light on the barriers against better gender balance and diversity in the work force.

Barriers for More Men – A Cultural Issue?

When dealing with gender issues from an international perspective, it is crucial to be aware of the diversity of cultural and institutional contexts in the field of ECEC. International comparison shows a wide diversity of institutional contexts – this is important to have in mind in cross-cultural research. Rohrmann et al. (2020) hold that cross-cultural research on men in ECEC must account for major cultural and social structural differences amongst countries. It is important to be aware that the roles of men and women are shaped within society and come to expression in various ways. Attitudes towards the role of ECEC in children's and parent's lives, the institutional contexts of training and work, and the degree of professionalisation in the field differ. Three levels must be taken into account:

- On the *macro level*, diversity *between* countries and national systems and structures
- On the *meso level*, diversity *within* countries and national systems and structures
- On the *micro level*, diversity *among individuals* studying or working in ECEC (Rohrmann et al., 2020).

On the micro level, Wohlgemuth (2015) points to the fact that men's motives for studying social and educational professions are individual and connected to specific life experiences. Similarly, Brody et al. (2021) highlight the variety of individual men's career paths in ECEC. This contrasts with generalisations on the role of gender on men's experiences in the workplace, and simplifying explanations on the low proportion of male workers as low salaries or the minority status of men.

On meso and macro level, disparities between gender discourses in countries and cultures come into view. To exemplify how different dimensions have implications for policy and practice, countries in Northern Europe and in Africa can be compared. In Norway, it is acknowledged in the general discourse within society that children benefit from meeting both men and women in ECEC settings. Most parents agree that it is essential for the children's upbringing to meet a professional gender balanced staff. Subsequently, it is incorporated in the curriculum that a focus on gender equality should be a part of ECEC practice (Emilsen et al., 2023).

On the other hand, researchers in African countries find barriers to men's engagement that include strict cultural practices, gatekeeping, and limited state action. Childcare is widely seen as women's work, and resistant traditional cultures influence attempts to effect change (Ebrahim, 2023). Moreover, the involvement of men causes concerns about sexual violence and harassment, which are omnipresent in discourses on masculinities in African societies (Bhana et al., 2022).

However, a general distrust of male childcare workers can be found worldwide, despite general positive notions on more men. Such debates occur in most countries, but they influence practice differently. Men's close physical contact with children is often connected to fear of paedophilia and insecurity about appropriate behaviour in daily routines like comforting children or changing nappies. The fear of paedophilia is perceived as a significant obstacle for men, even in countries with a strong emphasis on gender equality like Sweden (Eidevald et al., 2018). Brody et al. (2021) conclude that 'the development of a professional approach to close body contact in work with children is crucial to overcome the idea that physical closeness is "natural" between women and children, whereas it is potentially "dangerous" when a man is involved' (p. 193).

The relevance of cultural diversities becomes also visible in a comparison of developments in Brazil and China. In Brazil, a growing interest in men in the field of ECEC is connected to critical studies on gender and sexuality. Tensions arose when conservative and religious groups questioned men's presence in ECEC because they might interfere with traditional understandings of gender roles (Goncalves & Vinícius Sales dos Santos, 2023). The opposite is true for China, where men in ECEC are welcomed because they shall prevent boys to become 'sissy'. Male kindergarten teachers are expected to act as role models for socially accepted forms of masculinity, and programmes for more men are developed in this context (Xu et al., 2022).

> *"Women still statistically dominate the ECEC workforce worldwide, and dropout rates among male early childhood education and care (ECEC) workers, in general, are high."*

The EECERA SIG Gender Balance – An International Research Network

In 2010, we formed an international research network on the issue of men, women, and gender balance in the ECEC workforce, and established it as 'Special Interest Group' (SIG) in the context of EECERA (European Early Childhood Education Research Association). The members of the SIG focus on the important role gender plays in adult-child relations and support the aim of increasing the proportion of male workers towards a more gender-balanced ECEC workforce. However, a critical lens is necessary for understanding the complexities of gender and diversity, and for overcoming simplified and stereotyped understandings of the role of men in children's lives. We see research as crucial for achieving more knowledge about the relevance of teachers and their gender in the workforce and practices. It is highly relevant to learn more about the significance of ECEC workers' gender for children's development. It is also critical to investigate the interrelations of gender balance in the workforce and the promotion of gender equality, gender-sensitive strategies for recruitment for ECE training and work, recruitment and retention of men in the ECEC workforce, and gender relations in ECEC in general. In this context, issues of cultural traditions as well as differences between national ECEC systems turn out to be highly relevant.

The SIG focuses on the links of research, practice, and policy, intends to provide an academic forum for the promotion, development, and dissemination of research, and facilitates cooperation and collaboration between researchers in the field. Since 2012, the SIG has organised symposia and conferences on the annual conferences of EECERA as an arena for researchers to meet and discuss issues and perspectives for further research and policy making. Annual reports, regular newsletters, and publication lists are published on the SIG website on the EECERA platform, https://www.eecera.org/sig/gender-balance/. Below, we give some examples of research and publications as acceded in the SIG network.

Research and Publications

The first result of the SIG research collaboration was a special issue on men in ECEC published in 2015, a joint project by six colleagues who were leading researchers in the field in their own countries (Rohrmann & Emilsen, 2015). The special issue opened a broad scope of research results, engendered many new questions and served as a vocal starting point for further research and debate. The editors concluded that more research was needed to deepen our understanding of gender perspectives in ECEC. In the following years, several research projects had their outspring from the SIG network.

Research on teachers' career trajectories over the past two decades pointed to the complexity of why teachers leave and stay in the profession. This was the starting point for the project *Men's Career Trajectories (MCT) in the ECEC workforce – why they leave and why they stay* (Brody et al., 2021). Taking a broad international perspective and exploring the role of gender in career decisions, an international team from 12 culturally diverse countries unpacked how gender concepts influence men's career trajectories. Through their collaborative research, the team investigated various critical and relevant factors such as professionalisation, leadership, day-to-day interactions in the workplace, critical moments, masculinities, and several more.

While the MCT project focused on male practitioners, a subsequent project looks at *Children's Perspectives on their Teachers (CPT)* with a gender lens. This project is an ethnography-informed study constructed from case studies of children's perspectives on their male and female teachers in ten different countries that include the Global North as well South: Australia, Brazil, China, England, Indonesia, Israel, Norway, South Africa, Turkey, and the USA.

Cross-cultural perspectives are also developed by other collaborations within the SIG, including research on masculinities (e.g. Bhana et al. 2022), comparative perspectives on statistics (e.g. Rohrmann et al., 2023) and on the roles of men in ECEC (e.g. Xu et al., 2022), parent's views on male ECEC teachers (e.g. Sak et al., 2019), and on understandings of gender beyond traditional binaries (e.g. Xu et al., 2020). Furthermore, the SIG makes visible research from non-English speaking countries by inviting colleagues from all over the world and presenting their contributions on its conferences and symposia.

Some Closing Remarks

We are convinced that in a globalised world, debates on the involvement of men in ECEC must listen to the voices of various stakeholders worldwide, including men and women from the Global South. Diversities among men and among women need to be recognised, as well as a broader range of gendered identities. This sometimes leads to debates on the relevance of gender and the idea of a "gender neutral" education. We conclude from our international research that a focus on men remains relevant. "Gender neutral" approaches to education do not offer a way out of the complexity of gendered relations and patterns in the field of ECEC. With wider perspectives on gender and diversity, the inclusion of more men into the workforce can contribute to the further development of ECEC in general.

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MEN IN ECEC: [UN]NOTICEABLE BY THEIR ABSENCE

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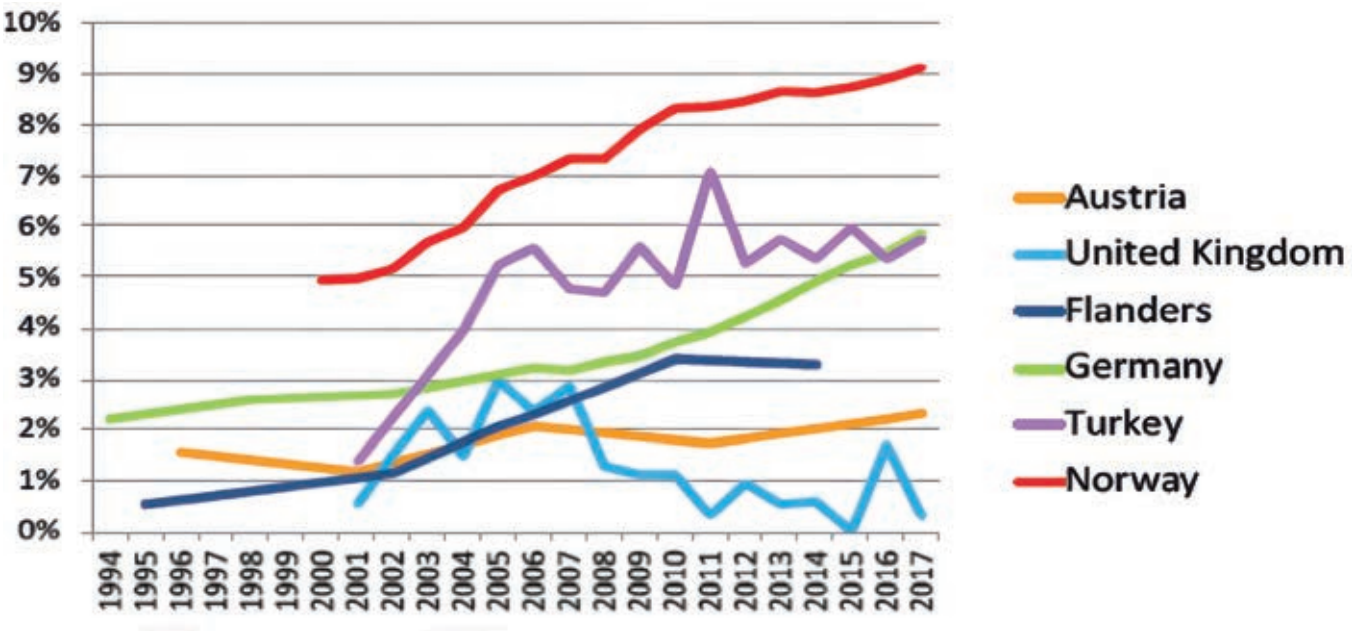
Introduction

As a man who has worked in the Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)[1] sector for over twenty years and campaigned for improved equality of opportunity for males to do so, reflecting on the current percentage of men in the UK ECEC workforce is, in some ways, a dispiriting exercise. Despite much hand-wringing, advocacy, lobbying and awareness raising over the last two decades, nothing has changed. The percentage of men in the UK ECEC workforce remains stubbornly low at around two percent (Department for Education, 2023). This figure is fairly consistent internationally, with a few notable exceptions in countries such as Norway (9%), Turkey and Germany (6%), where funding and political backing have made a difference.

1 The term 'Early Years' is typically used for 'Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)' in the UK and I use both terms interchangeably in this article.

Figure 1. *Proportion of male workers in ECEC staff in selected European countries (Rohrmann et al, 2018)*



Barriers to Men from Entering the ECEC Workforce

Considering this invariable long-term situation, it seems we are not interested in the idea of men educating and caring for our youngest children. I would suggest that, as a society, we are in some ways actively opposed to this notion on the basis that the vocation regarded as "childcare" falls under the accepted remit of "women's activities" (Williams in Tcaffell, 2013). As such, it may be regarded as unusual and even sinister for men to elect to be a part of the ECEC workforce and therefore legitimate to question their motives for challenging established gender roles.

This is certainly a plausible explanation for the lack of men entering the profession. It simply does not enter our collective consciousness to offer the care and education of young children as a viable and appropriate pursuit for males. I am not aware of any young boy thinking, "When I grow up, I want to work in a nursery." I have interviewed many men working in ECEC. Typically, their route into their job role was unplanned. It may have come about through a work experience release from school, a temporary summer job or a voluntary placement in an ECEC centre, often through contact with a relative who worked there. Many have told me how they had no idea what the work entailed and that they anticipated the experience with some trepidation, wondering whether they would fit in and how the children, the female staff and the parents would respond to their presence.

Wright and Brownhill (2019) offer us a list of factors that might impact on men's perceptions of ECEC and may deter them from working in the sector:

- A perceived lack of intellectual challenge
- Working in the Early Years is really hard work
- Now wanting to feel isolated
- Limited career progression opportunities in the sector
- The fear of being discriminated against
- Not knowing that the Early Years is an employment choice
- Challenge to one's sexuality
- The appeal of other forms of employment
- Workplace politics

Many of these potential deterrents have historical and societal roots in widespread gender stereotypes held by both men and women. These ingrained beliefs are powerful forces shaping our society and maintaining the status quo. It would be very unusual, for example, for an employment advisor to suggest to boys that they might consider working in the ECEC sector or for a boy's parents to encourage him to pursue a career in early education.

Does the Lack of Men Matter for Society?

But so what? Does it matter? Does it matter to men, to women or to children? Does it matter to society? It is interesting to consider the resources and support, and the profile of initiatives to promote women's equality, particularly in relation to increasing the proportion

of females active in the industries such as Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths (STEM), where females have traditionally been underrepresented in the workforce.

The British Government has a Minister for Women and Equalities whose remit encompasses the strategic oversight of Government's equality policy, for women, ethnicity and LGBT (GOV.UK, 2023). It is interesting to note there is no explicit mention of men, perhaps because it is assumed that there are no areas of modern society in which men would wish to be fully represented where they have not already achieved recognition. A Google search for "Women in STEM" produces a substantial list of results including statistics for recent changes in workforce gender percentages, for example, there was an increase from 21% to 24% in the proportion of the STEM workforce who are women between 2016 – 2019 (Sava, 2022). A similar search for "Men in ECEC or Early Years" returns a significantly shorter list, no current funded initiatives to promote, recruit or support men in ECEC roles and, as we have already seen, a very low, unchanging percentage of men in the ECEC workforce over the same period. From a pure equality perspective, I would argue that it matters to society that men continue to be effectively excluded from the ECEC workforce with no political will to change this.

The men who have had the opportunity to experience teaching young children and who have made a success of their ECEC careers have discovered that the primary reward is the privilege of building supportive relationships with young children and the main fulfilment comes from making a difference to children's lives . This realisation, which often comes as a surprise, can be seen in the positive responses revealed in short interviews with men in ECEC practice recorded at the first UK national Men in Early Years conference held in Southampton in 2016 (SAMEY, 2016)

- *It's the most rewarding, most fulfilling job I've ever done. The welcome I receive from the children – you can't compare it to anything else, it's so heart warming!*
- *I never really thought I'd be in Early Years when I imagined my future, but now I don't think I'd want to do anything else.*
- *The best part of this job for me is that you get thanked every single day – by the children and their parents, I don't think there's many other jobs where you can experience that.*
- *It's those hours of the day when the children are trying, you're able to be there and support them on that journey and it finally clicks, they have that light bulb moment when they get it and you think – yeh, this is what it's all about!*

This is not a profession suited to all men, just as it is not for all women. I believe that we should be looking to build a mixed-gender workforce, not necessarily a gender-balanced workforce. A workforce composed of 50% men and 50% women is not necessarily achievable nor indeed desirable. The overriding principle must be that we employ the best people for the job, those with the aptitude, character, professional skill and underpinning knowledge of child development to enable them to provide optimal care and education in its widest sense for children during their critical, formative years.

Given the percentage of men in the workforce currently, we are effectively discriminating by excluding them. In general, men do not know anything about the sector. They do not reply to job adverts or embark on training to become Early Years teachers as they do not consider themselves suitable candidates. For any young male actually considering working in ECEC, it is a daunting prospect knowing that he represents a minority. At a time when he is establishing his identity as an adult, entering a female workplace causes him to reflect on what sort of a male he is supposed to be in this context. Are there expectations of him based on his gender? Is he supposed to fit in with 'the way things are done around here'? Culture is powerful and the organisational values, beliefs and practices come from the leadership. Whether a man succeeds or fails in the ECEC centre can very much depend on the manager. Is he free to bring the best version of himself to work each day and to offer this to the children?

One male reception teacher in a small primary school where he was the only man recalled how his lessons would be interrupted periodically with requests for him to help lorry drivers unload heavy deliveries. This does not value his identity in his professional role, rather it plays to an unhelpful gender stereotype of the muscular man and his suitability for manual tasks over his female colleagues. If we believe it matters to men that there are so few of them represented in the workforce, then we have to recognise, promote and support their professional identity as teachers alongside and equal to that of their peers.

As a man who knows the difference I can make to children's development, I argue that it does matter to men that they are not represented in any significant way in the ECEC workforce. Men are missing out on a fulfilling career option – at a time when we are experiencing a staff retention and recruitment crisis. Might men represent an untapped resource?

Does it Matter to Children?

In 2017, following a meeting with Caroline Dinenage, the then British Minister for Women, Equalities and Early Years, an Early Years Workforce Strategy (Department for Education, 2017) was published, which addressed the need for action to engage more men in the Early Years workforce. One of its listed actions was the formation of a Task and Finish Group to come up with recommendations for the Department for Education to recruit more men into the sector. The group, which I chaired, duly met and produced an internal report. This resulted in a grant being awarded to the Fatherhood Institute to set up a website www.miteyuk.org to act as a central point for resources and initiatives to promote ECEC roles to men and to support employers, career advisors, training providers etc in championing Men In The Early Years (MITEY).

MITEY continues to be maintained by the Fatherhood Institute, both as a web resource and a social media presence, but it does so solely through the goodwill of those involved. The funding has long since dried up.

An interesting aspect of the discussions with the UK Government about the recommendations from the Task and Finish Group was a request to track any improvements in children's outcomes as a result of employing more men, i.e. a return on investment. Our Government's desired answer to their 'So what?' needed to be quantified in academic test result scores. Of

course, this is an impossible ask. It would be impossible to assess if children's development had improved as a direct response to men being employed as teachers.

In 2019, the London Early Years Foundation, the largest provider of ECEC services across the greater London area, conducted a small research project into children's attitudes towards their teachers, based on their gender. The research concluded that most children related to male and female staff according to character rather than gender. Furthermore, children chose to participate in activities, such as sports, art, reading and music, with adults, male or female, based on whether they felt the adult was 'good at' the particular activity. For the children, it did not matter who they played with as long as that individual related to them (London Early Years Foundation, 2019).

If the children do not consider gender, rather basing their preferences on character, does it matter to them whether men are involved in their early care and education? While it is not possible to quantify the difference it would make to children if there were more men in the workforce, I believe it does matter to children that in most ECEC centres they do not have the opportunity to interact with male teachers.

According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2022, p.1):

> *Gender stereotypes and biases that are discriminatory are built in people's minds as early as childhood and limit children's and young people's futures. They can be reinforced but also challenged through the curriculum, teaching and learning materials and practices as well as daily interactions with teachers, parents and peers.*

The absence of men in the ECEC workforce prevents children from having opportunities to come into contact with, to build relationships with or to experience kind, nurturing, caring and joyful interactions with them. They are also not able to witness men and women working together, which could provide models of tolerant, respectful and affirming professional relationships. This restricts the possibility of challenging gender stereotypes, discriminatory and misogynistic biases that children might experience or be inculcated with elsewhere.

It is now well known that the first five years of life are foundational in terms of brain development. In the prime area of personal, social and emotional development, our attitudes and beliefs are shaped by our earliest experiences. The absence of men from the education workforce during children's early years means that this key time, when boys and girls are developing a sense of identity in relation to others, is modelled exclusively on interactions with female adult teachers during their time in ECEC centres. Whilst our female colleagues do an incredible job, the fact is that we are currently limiting the potential spectrum of character types for children to interact with to a single gender.

Conclusion

I have noted some of the barriers to men entering the ECEC workforce – accepted gender roles; lack of awareness; suspicion of motives; and perceived lack of intellectual challenge. There are also the issues of low pay; low status; fear of false allegations; isolation as a minority; and peer pressure. All of these are significant. We must applaud those men who overcome these hurdles to establish themselves in their role. As a society, we do not value ECEC relative to other sectors of education. The generally held belief is that this is not proper education, which really commences when children start school. Governments still find it difficult to justify investing in early childhood development. It is not unusual for headline policy announcements to publicise more affordable childcare for parents rather than focusing the benefits of ECEC for children.

What might we do to build a mixed-gender ECEC workforce? I offer a few suggestions but this is not a manifesto for change – many of us have already tried, with scant success, over many years:

- Improve pay and status – we need to recognise the importance of investment in early education, acknowledging that 'the highest rate of economic returns comes from the earliest investments in children' (Heckman, 2023). We need to raise the status of the profession and remunerate teachers properly.
- Raise awareness – men need to know they are wanted in the sector. They need to be invited in. UK government guidance states that 'positive action measures in the Equality Act 2010 allows employers to take proportionate action that aims to reduce disadvantage, meet different needs and increase participation' (Government Equalities Office, 2023). It is legitimate to take action to address the under-representation of men in the ECEC workforce. Perhaps a first step could be a job advert that invites applications from men and women? Maybe we could see a man working in ECEC in a role on a mainstream TV soap opera with positive story lines? We need to change public attitudes.
- Create welcoming, inclusive and supportive spaces – men need to know they are welcome for who they are, to fulfil a professional role without expectations based on their gender. This needs strong leadership at every level in schools, colleges and ECEC centres.

We talk about the need to be an inclusive society. We recognise the challenges our children face being raised in an ever more fragmented world where many of them are denied relationships with kind, caring, nurturing and funny men who can offer them unconditional attention. Yet, as a society, we do nothing to address the absence of men in the ECEC workforce. Surely this is an issue worthy of our attention – for the sake of our children?

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Overcoming Barriers to Increase Men's Representation in Early Childhood Education and Care

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In Ireland, only two percent of the staff in early childhood education are men. The situation is similar in most other European countries, where men make up less than five percent of workers who educate and care for young children (OECD, 2020). Increasingly, research is being conducted with an aim to understanding why men are underrepresented in early childhood and pre-primary education, and what steps can be taken to address this gender disparity. One likely explanation for men's underrepresentation in early childhood education and care is discrimination against men, rooted in culturally shared gender stereotypes. We will outline where these stereotypes come from and what effects they can have on men's experiences in caring professions.

We Think People Are What We See Them Do

Gender stereotypes are culturally shared beliefs, which come from our observations of men and women in their daily lives. When we see women regularly performing caring tasks, such as being nurturing and attending to children, or working as nurses or teachers, we make inferences assuming that women are naturally good at performing these tasks because they would have innate nurturing and caring traits. In other words, we stereotypically associate these so called 'communal traits' more with women than men, because these traits are linked to roles that women typically occupy in society. Conversely, when we see more men than women working in high status, high paid positions such as company CEOs or managers, we assume that men naturally possess related qualities that make a good leader. In other words, we stereotypically associate these so called 'agentic traits' – being strong, assertive, and dominant – more with men than women, because these traits are linked to roles that men typically occupy in society. As such, observations of the social roles of men and women inform our beliefs about men and women as gender categories, the traits they possess, and consequently professions they may be more or less suited to perform.

In addition to shaping how we think men and women typically are, stereotypes also inform our beliefs about how men and women should be. This means that people not only think that women are more communal than men and men are more agentic than women, but also that these differences in traits and abilities are the way that men and women should be. Such prescriptive stereotypes can lead to confusion, prejudice, and discrimination when people do not conform to behaviour prescribed for their gender. For example, women who behave in an agentic manner can be punished for being too dominant and assertive, even when they are in a leader role that may include such behaviour (Williams & Tiedens, 2016)more than men, experience negative outcomes when they display dominance. A closer look, however, reveals ambiguity about the specific forms of dominance proscribed for women. Here, we suggest that negative reactions to women's dominance, a counter-stereotypical behavior, may require that the behavior be clearly encoded as counter-stereotypical—which is less likely when the behavior is expressed implicitly. This hypothesis was tested with a meta-analysis of studies on the evaluation of individuals behaving dominantly, including articles not directly investigating gender. Results revealed that dominance indeed hurts women's, relative to men's, likability (although the overall effect is small, $d = -0.19$, $k = 63$. In a similar way, men can experience negative consequences for behaving in a way that is perceived as too communal. For example, experimental research that used fictitious descriptions of employees found that men who work in caring professions are seen as less worthy of respect and less competent than their identical female counterparts (Heilman & Wallen, 2010). As such, our stereotypical expectations for how women and men should behave have real world consequences for people pursuing careers perceived to be incongruent with their gender, such as men educating and caring for young children.

In addition to affecting how we perceive others, stereotypes can also inform our own beliefs about what professions we may be a good fit for. 'Lack of fit' describes the belief that one's characteristics do not align with those of a particular profession and can be seen, for example, when women pursue leadership positions. Women may see a discrepancy between themselves and the required skills for the role of a leader. As such, women may self-select out of contention for leadership positions. As early childhood education and care requires nurturing and caring abilities, and these are seen to align more closely with stereotypical female traits, men likely experience lack of fit perceptions between the attributes of their male gender role and the role of an early childhood educator. Similar to women and leadership positions, men's perceptions about their lack of fit for the role may result in them self-selecting out of careers in early childhood education and care. This limits the professional pool of applicants, reducing the possibility for increasing diversity in early childhood and pre-primary education from the outset.

Stereotypical Beliefs about Men in Early Childhood Education and Care

When examining the stereotypes that underpin the reason why men may be perceived as unsuitable for a career educating or caring for young children, people typically report either that they believe men are less competent with children than women. In fact, research found that

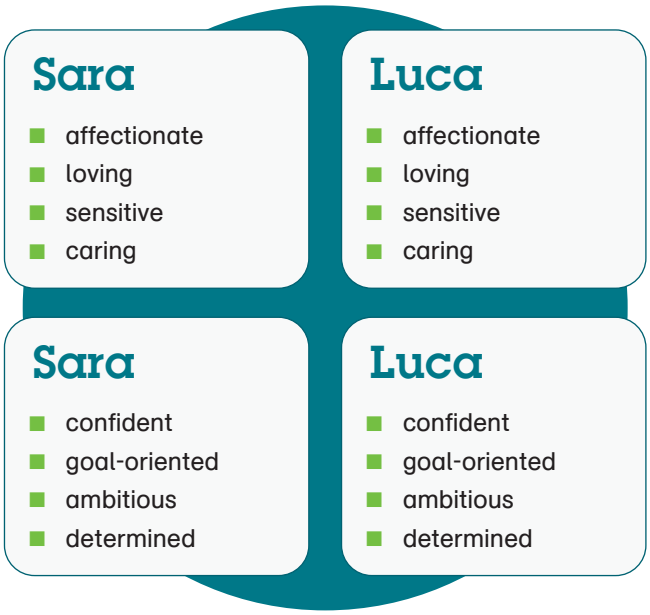
female co-workers report that men are perceived as less competent (Sullivan et al., 2020) and also that men working in early childhood education themselves report having to combat beliefs about their incompetence, particularly when they begin working at their organisation (Cronin, 2014; Pirard et al., 2015). In fact, many people see no problem with a lack of men in early childhood education and care for this very reason—they believe that caring for children is something men are simply not good at. As people believe that working with young children requires 'maternal instincts' or communal traits and men are assumed to possess these traits less than women, men are perceived as less competent with children than women. Naturally, this can be a barrier for men interested in working with children as, because of their gender, they are assumed to be less capable in their chosen role than women.

Another common finding in the literature is that people tend to believe that men may pose a threat to children in their care, and as such, are less suitable for careers working with children than women. This suspicion is based on the flawed belief that men who want to work with children must have questionable motives (Heikkilä & Hellman, 2017). That is, people assume that it is so unnatural for a man to want to work with children that he must have nefarious intentions. To mitigate this suspicion, men who work in early childhood education and care often monitor their own behaviour, or are monitored by other educators in order to reduce the potential for being perceived as a threat (Sargent, 2005). For example, men who work with small children may avoid physical contact with them, or ensure they are visible at all times to avoid suspicion (Pruit, 2015). These considerations are things their female colleagues would not have to think twice about, which places an additional burden on men working with young children and thus may hinder their ability to fully embrace their role. Working in a career where one is placed under close scrutiny as a result of one's gender likely reduces many men's interest in and enthusiasm for working in early childhood education and care.

Men Applying for Positions in Early Childhood Education: Impact of Lower Perceived Competence and Greater Perceived Threat

In our own research, we set out to test how these two barriers – perceived lower competencies and greater perceived threat – may help explain people's impaired perceptions of men pursuing a career in early childhood education and care. Specifically, we examined how suitable men and women are perceived to be for a career in early childhood education and care, and whether beliefs about their competence with children or the potential threat they pose drive these perceptions. In an experiment, we created four identical fictitious profiles for a potential early childhood educator who had successfully completed an internship in the field. The only factors that varied between the profiles were the gender of the candidate (Sara – female or Luca – male) and their personality traits. That is, we described the candidate as having either communal traits stereotypically associated with women (such as being affectionate and loving) or agentic traits stereotypically associated with men (such as being confident and determined). Figure 1 displays he four candidate profiles we used.

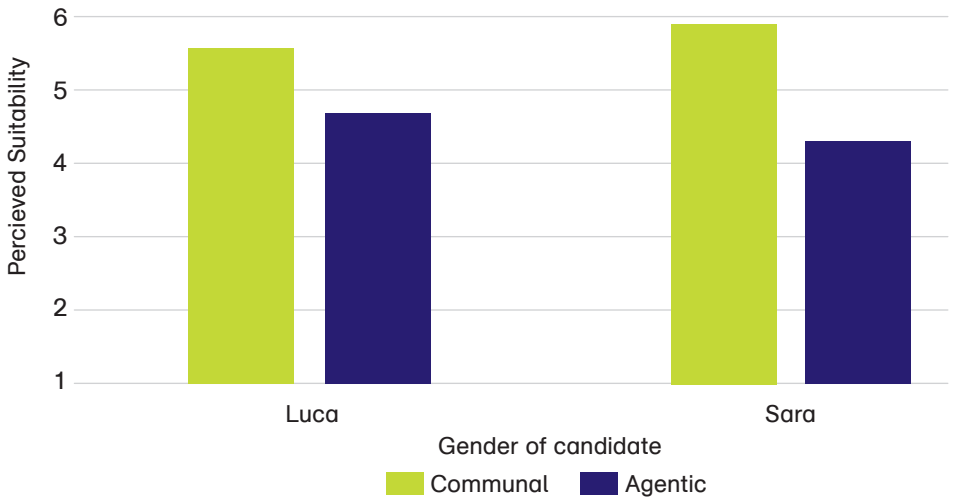
Figure 1. *Profiles of candidates for early childhood educator, with varying gender and personality traits*



In our study, we then provided participants with one of the four profiles and asked them to indicate how suitable they thought the candidate was for a job as an early childhood educator. After this, we also asked them to rate how competent they considered the candidate to be. Finally, we asked participants about how much of a threat they considered the candidate to be – both in terms of sexually and physically abusing a child.

Based on these self-reported ratings, we found that the candidate's gender influenced how suitable people thought they were for a job as an early childhood educator. Consistent with our expectations, the male candidate called Luca was considered less suitable for early childhood education than the female candidate called Sara, regardless of his personality traits. Similar to the effect of the candidates' gender, the candidate's personality traits also influenced how suitable people thought they were for a job as an early childhood

Figure 2. *Average perceived suitability for early childhood education depending on the fictitious candidate's gender and personality traits*



educator. Again, consistent with our expectations, the communal candidates were rated as more suitable for early childhood education than agentic candidates. Figure 2 illustrates these differences in participants' perceived suitability ratings.

In a next step, we examined why these different suitability ratings occur, given we showed participants identical information about the male and female candidate. Results showed that women were considered much more competent in caring for children than men, and this in turn contributed to people's beliefs that the female candidate was more suitable for early childhood education than the male candidate. We also found that though perceived educator competence was highly relevant, perceived threat to children did not play a role in men's lower perceived suitability for the job. As such, we found that men were believed to be less suitable for a career in early childhood education because they were perceived as less competent – but not a greater threat – than women. This perceived lack of competence, and the potential bias it creates in hiring processes, likely has real-world implications on men's desire to pursue a career in early childhood education and care.

Effects of Discrimination and Recommendations to Support Men in Early Education

In fact, gender bias in early education was found to curb men's desire to pursue such careers. A recent experimental study told women and men that gender discrimination in early childhood education either exists, does not exist, or they received no information (Moss-Racusin et al., 2022). When men learned that gender bias exists in early childhood education, they were far less likely to express interest in pursuing a career in the field. When participants received no information, men were also less likely than women to express interest in early childhood education as a potential career path. This is likely because – true to real-world experiences – men anticipate discrimination in early childhood education and care, and as such, are less interested in pursuing it as a potential career. Interestingly, however, when men were told that no gender discrimination exists in the profession, they expressed just as much interest as the women did. This finding suggests that men are less interested in early childhood education and care at least in part because of anticipated gender discrimination. So, the question remains: With gender stereotypes affecting people's beliefs about men's ability to work with children, and potential discrimination in early childhood education and care reducing men's interest in working in the field, what steps can be taken to alleviate these factors and increase men's engagement? Based on the current empirical evidence, we can provide several evidence-based recommendations.

First, we recommend raising awareness of the underrepresentation of men in early childhood education and care. For this purpose, the systemic nature of men's underrepresentation needs to be acknowledged. The gender disparity in the field is not simply a result of individual men's choices, but rather a gendered system that prescribes certain jobs as more appropriate for women than for men. Acknowledging the systemic nature of the issue allows the gender-disparity to be highlighted and makes it a clear issue of gender discrimination. As such, it is important to engage organisational decision makers in gender equality efforts to effectively reduce systematic bias and discrimination in early childhood education and care settings.

Second, to properly reduce gender disparity in early childhood education, gendered expectations of how men are, and how they should be, need reshaping. Potential solutions for this could be encouraging men to engage in communal activities, or developing mentoring programmes for men pursuing careers in early childhood education and care to support their engagement and development in their role (Sullivan et al., 2023).

Third, gender reflexive environments could be created for educators to discuss the ways in which gender may play a role in their everyday experiences of their workplace. This could reduce negative experiences arising as a result of men's gender and allow them to feel more supported and included by their colleagues.

Finally, promoting communal values and encouraging boys to engage in communal activities, such as caring for others, may mitigate and reduce gender stereotypes and increase men's freedom to care openly for others in a variety of ways. This would allow future generations to be less restricted by gendered expectations and allow for greater gender diversity in all occupations.

Conclusion

Men's underrepresentation in early childhood education and care is at least partially a consequence of their anticipated discrimination in a traditionally women-dominated profession. Our research highlights how stereotypical beliefs about gender can negatively influence people's evaluations of male candidates for a job in early childhood education and care. Understanding the mechanisms behind people's gendered hiring decisions is important, as it informs policies and interventions aimed at reducing discrimination against men who aim to enter early childhood education and care. Taking steps to reduce biased hiring decisions and supporting men who already work in the field would not only be the right thing to increase fairness. It could additionally allow more men to become early childhood educators and subsequently reduce the gender disparity in early childhood education and care.

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WHERE ARE THE MEN IN ECEC IN IRELAND?

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Introduction

In 2012, Barnardos had the foresight to focus an issue of this journal, *ChildLinks*, on the very important issue of gender balance in the Irish early years workforce. The Men in Childcare Network Ireland were interviewed and a piece of research by Damien Walshe, carried out in collaboration with the then Waterford City Childcare Committee, explored the purpose of the Network and some of the challenges the group faced. A decade on, has anything changed? Where is the Men in Childcare Network? Are we any closer to a gender balanced workforce? Does anyone in an official capacity even care?

Men in Childcare Network Ireland (MiC)

Men in Childcare Network Ireland (MiC) originated with a conference held in 2004, where the lack of men in early years in Ireland was identified as an issue. It was clear that gender balance and diversity within the sector, and the benefits this would bring to the quality of early years provision in Ireland, needed to be addressed. At the time, the childcare sector in Ireland had the lowest representation of male workers in Europe, at less than 1%. In 2006, a working group came together to develop the first work plan and this group established the Men in Childcare Network. A follow up plan published in 2010 brought the activities of the group up to 2014.

Over that time, a voluntary management committee co-ordinated the activities, steered the work plans and managed the Network, managing to develop a very strong focus on the issue. The Network was assisted with some funding and administrative assistance from 16 County & City Childcare Committees (CCCs), and the then Waterford County Childcare Committee managed the finances. This voluntary

The main aim of the Men in Childcare Network Ireland (MiC) was to work towards an increased representation of men in the childcare sector in Ireland, with particular emphasis on the benefits for the child. The vision, as set down by the group, was that children would feel that it was normal to be cared for by both women and men. The vision was based on the belief that children benefit from a gender balanced care setting and that it is optimum in terms of the social development of a healthy child. The Network also championed the idea that the inclusion of trained male childcare workers could undo a tremendous amount of negative stereotyping about men and their abilities to nurture and care for children. Finally, the Network held that in an era of equality, with a growing awareness of gender equality issues, it is perfectly logical for men to aspire to such a vision.

Some Achievements of the Network 2006–2014

Between 2006 and 2014, a committee for the MiC Network was formally established and a bank account was set up. Phone and email contact was established and maintained through voluntary efforts, and the Network also received the support of a part time Admin person via Waterford County Childcare Committee (CCC). The CCC also agreed to look after finances. Funding was secured from 16 CCCs and two successful applications were made to FAS through the Social Inclusion Fund. Several other applications, however, were unsuccessful. The Network became members of the Equality & Diversity Network (EDENN).

The Network undertook a number of promotional campaigns, including the creation and maintenance of a Facebook group[1]. A promotional flyer was designed and printed, and circulated through CCCs nationally. Press releases were distributed promoting the Network and members were available for interview by the media. A script was developed for a DVD, with the finished product 'Face of Men in Irish Childcare' launched and distributed widely. The Network participated in a number of international conferences and networking opportunities, and staged several national events, including conferences. The Network also devised a strategy devised that was piloted around the country, and drew up a resource list.

One of the key aspects of the work of the MiC Network was the provision of support directly to men interested in the sector or working in the sector through networking, information sharing, and also one to one. The Network also supported students at all academic levels who were researching the subject of gender balance in the sector, and provided speakers to various courses.

The MiC Network also contributed to ECCE debate in a number of key areas including submissions to Work Force Development Plan and Start Strong Consultation

Key areas of work

The key focus areas for the MiC Network were:

1. To continue to grow the Men in Childcare Network as an organisation by strengthening the organisational team, connecting and recruiting new men and retaining existing members.
2. To obtain sufficient funding for the continuation of the Network and to employ a development worker.
3. To hold an annual Men in Childcare Conference in Ireland.
4. To increase the visibility of the Men in Childcare Network through political lobbying, and by promoting education, providing information and offering support and advice relating to men in childcare.
5. To work towards a 5% target for men in childcare in Ireland by 2020.
6. To collaborate with others in order to address the issue of low pay in the childcare sector and to campaign for increased salary scales.

1 The Facebook group is still operating in 2023 with a number of administrators from around the world

By 2014, however, the MiC Network was forced to re-evaluate the time commitment and direction of the work. At that time, funding was very tight nationally, the annual plans of CCCs were refocused by government leaving less time and resources for flexibility in their actions, and the workload on the sector was increasing. Furthermore, the Association of Childhood Professionals was emerging to champion the cause of professionalism and pay within the sector. While the MiC Network decided to wind down activities, individual members continued to promote the aims of the group through advocacy, mentoring, support and information sharing. Members also played an active role in the development of the Association of Childhood Professionals at local and national level, where it was hoped that professionalism and increased pay might entice more men into the sector.

Two Examples of Best Practice from Europe

Germany

In 2012, MiC attended an international conference in Berlin, Germany. At the time, just 2.9% of the German ECEC workforce were male. As part of their workforce development plan, the German government were committed to increasing the proportion of male educators, with the Ministry of Family Affairs and the European Social Fund spending a combined €13 million on the "More Men in Early Childhood Education and Care" programme. The funding went toward staffing, conferences, information tours, advertisement in public media and mentoring. Since 2012, the number of males working in ECEC in Germany has increased by 38,056 to 57,904 in 2022.

Norway

Since 1990, the number of men employed in the Norwegian ECEC sector has increased fivefold. At present, more than 9% of all early years educators in Norway are men, which is a significantly higher share than in the other Nordic countries. Norway's success can be attributed to persistent political efforts nationally, regionally, and locally.

The first national action plan to increase the number of men working in early years was developed in 1997, and, in 1998, in an act of affirmative action, it became legal for employers to hire a man ahead of a woman in cases of equal, or almost equal qualifications (NIKK, 2019). From 2000 to 2010, the Norwegian childcare sector was dramatically expanded, creating a surge in the demand for early years educators. County administrations

developed action plans specifying how to increase the recruitment of more male educators. Initiatives included conferences on gender equality and men in childcare, services with a high percentage of male educators were provided with additional resources to advise other centres on how to recruit and retain more men.

Special contests were advertised, where childcare operations involving at least 20% male employees were recognised. Special model childcare centres were also appointed, and resources provided to advise other centres on how to recruit and retain more men. In many counties, municipalities have the opportunity to invite boys in lower secondary school to work in childcare, with the boys being paid for their work. The idea is for the boys to gain a positive experience of childcare and that this ultimately will reduce the prevalence of gendered career choices. Since 2010 the number of municipalities that try to involve boys at the secondary school level to work in childcare has increased.

The Current State of Play in Ireland

While policy in Ireland has also shifted in recent years, there has been little change in the number of men employed in the sector. The most recent Early Years Sector Profile Report (Pobal, 2022) shows that in 2020/21, staff who worked directly with children were almost exclusively female (98%). This represents the same proportion of females reported every year since 2015/16, with the exception of 2019/20, when a question on gender was not asked.

Most recently the workforce plan for Early Learning and Care (ELC) and School-Age Childcare (SAC) in Ireland from 2022 to 2028 (Government of Ireland, 2021) stated that:

> *In terms of gender, the workforce is overwhelmingly female. Women make up 98% of those working in centre-based ELC. Although the number of men working in ELC has grown in recent years, their overall percentage in the total workforce stands at 2%. However, there is limited data on gender balance in SAC as most 'stand-alone' SAC providers are not included in the Pobal Sector Profile.* (p. 78)

The report laid out the following actions (Government of Ireland, 2021, pp. 80-81):

- Establishing mechanisms to monitor diversity in the ELC and SAC workforce.
- Once baseline data is available, consideration will be given to targets for diversity in the ELC and SAC workforce.
- Review and further roll-out of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion training across the ELC and SAC sector.
- Examining development of a range of entry routes into the sector (including apprenticeships or other work-based learning, and access programmes in FE and HE), along with the scope for targeting potential Educators / Practitioners from groups that are less well represented in the workforce.
- Careers actions will have a particular focus on information and supports for potential entrants to the workforce from minority groups and men, as well as Irish-language opportunities (including for those for whom Irish is not their first language).
- When career promotion activities are undertaken, they will clearly profile the potential for men and minority groups to work in the sector, as well as the opportunities for Irish-language speakers (both those for whom Irish is their first language and those for whom it is their second language).

Conclusion

In the 2012 issue of *ChildLinks*, Barnardos stated that less than 1% of the early childhood workforce were men. Today, over a decade later, it has risen to 2%. The current strategy document, *Nurturing Skills: The Workforce Plan for Early Learning and Care (ELC) and School-Age Childcare (SAC), 2022–2028* (Government of Ireland, 2021), sets out a number of steps to increase the percentages. These, however, are very broad and undefined and don't even go as far as the vision set out by the MiC Network or the valuable contribution the group managed to achieve. It is hard not to conclude that, without substantial resources like those we have seen in Germany and without someone in a position of authority naming the issue and putting a time bound target, we will see no tangible progress on achieving a more balanced early years workforce in Ireland.

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SHAPING THE FUTURE TOGETHER:

MEN'S CONTRIBUTIONS TO EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE

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Introduction

Globally, there continues to be a pattern of occupational gender segregation, where individuals of different genders tend to dominate different types of work (Levanon & Grusky, 2016). In early childhood education and care (ECEC) settings, women overwhelmingly make up most of the workforce, with only a small number of male educators (Andrew, 2016; Wright, 2016).

This paper reflects on a case study in Australia (Sullivan et al., 2022) that explored the experiences of male educators working together in two ECEC centres located in Queensland, Australia. This case study, the first of its kind, sought to examine the impact a grouping of men had on the workplace environment. It shed light on the challenges faced by men in the ECEC field globally and highlighted the importance of avoiding marginalising women in this process. The researchers analysed the men's perspectives on their work environment and specifically their feelings of being included and valued. The study found that, when men worked together as a group in a centre, they were able to create a more inclusive and trusting environment in the ECEC centre, which gave them the opportunity to have a meaningful professional impact. The case study also revealed an interesting pattern of behaviour, where male participants simultaneously praised and questioned their female colleagues, illustrating a dynamic of collegiality and challenge. This leads us to examine the issue of occupational gender segregation in ECEC settings, and the conflicts and opportunities it presents.

Workforce Challenges

Recruiting and retaining qualified educators is a persistent challenge for the ECEC sector The factors theorised to cause this issue include increased educator training policies, historically low levels of pay, tough working conditions, and high employee turnover, which can range from 37-47% (Thorpe, Jansen, et al., 2020). These factors are also reflected in the Big Start Ireland survey (Greer Murphy, 2020), which demonstrated that the impact of low wages, stressful work environments, and a lack of appreciation for early childhood professionals during the COVID-19 pandemic led to feelings of being undervalued.

Recent policy reviews by the OECD (2019) and UNICEF (2019) suggested hiring more men to promote gender diversity in the ECEC sector. As the ECEC sector grapples with the shortage of labour, recruiting more men in ECEC has become a practical necessity. Although increasing gender diversity within the sector is important, it is not a simple answer to address the sector's current challenges. Increasing one gender over another without addressing the need for support for all staff is unlikely to solve the sector's labour shortage (Thorpe, Sullivan, et al., 2020).

Gender Segregation

Gender segregation in the workforce is commonly found in occupations that are associated with specific gender identities (Whittock, 2000). It occurs when people believe that certain abilities and qualities are inherent to a particular gender, rather than acknowledging that people are shaped by social and cultural factors. This mindset has contributed to the division of roles between different groups in the workplace. While women now make up almost 50% of the UK and Australian workforces (Roantree, 2018; Statistics, 2023), segregation continues with occupations such as nursing, teaching, retail work and childcare being overly populated by women and men continuing to be overrepresented in fields such as engineering, policing, and transport (Levanon & Grusky, 2016; Wright, 2016). The pattern of occupational segregation persists despite equal opportunity policies in many countries and the weakening of traditional gender roles and expectations.

Gender segregation can result in a gender pay gap and a decrease in male participation in female-dominated service professions such as health and education (Buligescu et al., 2020). ECEC is traditionally seen as "women's work" (Bhana & Moosa, 2016), which can discourage men from pursuing careers in this field.

Gendered Barriers

Despite historical discriminatory exclusion, women who work in male-dominated roles such as being pilots, engineers, and FIFO (fly-in, fly-out) mining workers are often rewarded with higher pay and elevated social status, compared to women in other industries (Kossek et al., 2017). In contrast, men who choose to work in traditionally female-dominated professions associated with low wages not only face exclusion, but also must deal with challenges related to breaking gender stereotypes and societal expectations surrounding masculinity (Brody et al., 2021).

Men are discouraged from entering female-dominated professions such as nursing due to merely being a man (Guy et al., 2022), facing discrimination from both patients and colleagues. They also encounter negative stereotypes about male nurses, which can impact their job satisfaction. Additionally, career counsellors tend to hesitate when recommending nursing as a career for men (CEDA, 2023). A study on the experiences of men in nursing found that some individuals faced challenges related to their masculinity, perceived competence, and sexual orientation (Cottingham, 2019). Male nurses

were reportedly excluded from full involvement in their professional duties by either colleagues or patients due to concerns related to intimacy and touch (Clow et al., 2015; Gavine et al., 2020).

Although the effects of increasing men's representation in the ECEC sector are only beginning to emerge, studies suggest that men in this field also encounter similar types of exclusion and barriers to success (Gavine et al., 2020; Sullivan et al., 2022). When a man is employed in an ECEC service, he is typically the only male staff member (Thorpe, Jansen, et al., 2020). As a result, he is often perceived as both an outsider who faces discrimination and an asset who provides something rare. As a man working in a female-dominated environment, some people may see him as not belonging and treat him unfairly. Alternatively, having a male employee in an ECEC can create a sense of uniqueness and pride within the community (Sullivan et al., 2020).

Perspectives of Men in ECEC

Societal norms suggest that men's participation in ECEC is not aligned with masculinity, and men often face the same gender-based discrimination experienced by women in male-dominated professions (Moosa & Bhana, 2022). For decades, men working in ECEC have been seen as unconventional and unusual (Bhana & Moosa, 2016). One of the most concerning representations of male educators is that of a potential sexual predator, which can lead to exclusion from duties and caution with physical touch such as cuddling and comforting children (Heikkilä & Hellman, 2017; Moosa & Bhana, 2022). In a study by Brody et al. (2021), a male educator described how he was excluded from changing a child's nappy due to being viewed as different and this had a subsequent negative impact on his self-esteem. The perceived risk associated with men working in ECEC is one of many reasons why men have low levels of participation and higher rates of departure from the profession (Brody et al., 2021).

Furthermore, studies show that men working in ECEC often face discrimination from their female colleagues who question their abilities. They can see men as risk-takers, resulting in a belief of possible dangerous or harmful rough and tumble play, or a tendency towards incompetence when assessing children's risky play activities (Sandseter, 2014; Sullivan et al., 2020). This perception also extends to professional responsibilities, where men are often labelled as having fun and not doing the administrative work, while women take on the more serious paperwork tasks (Thorpe, Jansen, et al., 2020). These negative beliefs and stereotypes can lead to labelling male colleagues as lazy, irresponsible, and/or unprofessional, which can create a hostile work environment (Thorpe, Sullivan, et al. (2020).

ECEC work is seen as women's work due to the societal norm of caregiving and mothering as a natural female trait (Xu et al., 2020). Despite efforts to professionalise ECEC, the categorisation of the sector as one of service and care has resulted in low pay and low social status. Increasing diversity in ECEC could challenge these gender stereotypes and ultimately benefit all workers by questioning the gendered construction of the profession.

Groups of Men in ECEC: A Brief Case Study

Sullivan et al. (2022) investigated men's accounts of inclusion and whether the grouping of men together changed their experience of working in an ECEC centre. Ten men from two ECEC centres were interviewed. Both centres had male directors, and the male educators constituted 20% and 25% of the staff, respectively, a substantial difference to the global norm of 3% (Brody, 2021). The participants were encouraged to share their experiences and perspectives of working with a group of men in their own words, with the main findings highlighted below.

Support from other men was critical

> *He was really good at guiding and helping me throughout my journey.*

This study showed that men working as educators in the female-dominated field of ECEC face significant challenges in being accepted and trusted by their colleagues. The men in this study shared that the support they received from their fellow men was critical to counter the feeling they had of being an outsider. This enabled the men to develop their foundation of practice as an educator in a safe environment. Male peer support, both professionally and personally, was found to be essential in retaining the men. The presence of supportive role models and a team of male educators is considered crucial to facilitate entry and sustained inclusion in ECEC (Sullivan et al., 2022).

“This study showed that men working as educators in the female-dominated field of ECEC face significant challenges in being accepted and trusted by their colleagues.”

Mentoring and being part of the team was invaluable

> *I wasn't just a male in childcare, we were all working together.*

The men who received support and mentorship from their female colleagues found it invaluable in developing their confidence and skills as educators. This support enabled them to form a distinct educator identity and improved their professional learning. Their confidence in themselves as educators was able to thrive and flourish with this mentorship. However, the risk of singling out men as a source of pride may marginalise the sustained and important work of women. This emphasises the importance of collegial mentorship and support for all educators in the ECEC sector.

Relationships create belonging

> *I get along with everyone. It doesn't matter, gender.*

The study highlighted that working in a team with both men and women provided valuable perspectives and fostered a sense of belonging and collegiality. Colleagues were shown to be advocating for one another, promoting the benefits of working together and developing close relationships both inside and outside of work. Such relationships led to a stronger sense of community and a more positive workplace environment, benefiting children, educators, and families. This also meant that educators were more likely to say they planned to stay working in the ECEC centre due to a feeling of belonging.

There are challenges

> *You're almost put in positions where you have to prove yourself.*

Educator teams with diverse genders can also produce challenges. Men may feel the need to prove their worth and competence to female colleagues, and vice versa. Further, perceptions of what professional work is can vary between genders, causing misunderstandings. Gender stereotyping can also marginalise the contributions of women in ECEC, and all diverse educators. Through mutual respect and understanding, collegial teams can provide valuable perspectives and promote a sense of belonging and camaraderie for one another, ultimately enhancing the quality of care and education provided to children.

How to Create Diversity in ECEC

Despite recent attention to labour shortages, the ECEC sector has continually faced difficulty in recruiting and retaining a diverse workforce. Although low wages and high work demands are contributing factors to the high turnover rates, men face distinct challenges related to questions about their motives and navigating stereotypes (Moosa & Bhana, 2022). The research discussed in this paper suggests gathering men to work together seems a smart proposal to reduce the turnover rates. However, while addressing structural issues is a long-term goal, the immediate workplace environment, such as collegial relationships and high-quality leadership, can provide important and immediate support for recruiting and retaining men in ECEC (Sullivan et al., 2020).

Creating a diverse and inclusive workforce in the ECEC sector requires a multi-faceted approach.

- Diversity-sensitive policy frameworks, including gender-specific codes of conduct, are necessary to support workforce diversity and inclusion (Sullivan et al., 2022).
- Investing in inclusive work environments and training is crucial in retaining a disappearing workforce (McDonald et al., 2018). Early training can promote inclusive communication and provide educators with the knowledge and skills to identify and challenge biases in the classroom.
- Mentorship of new male staff members is critical and should be purposefully allocated as a means of emotional support and knowledge-based coaching (Sullivan et al., 2022). This means placing men together when in teaching positions to allow them access to peer mentorship and support.

By supporting future educators with gender inclusive skills, knowledge, and teacher training, the sector can become more inclusive and can begin to create a more diverse and equitable ECEC environment.

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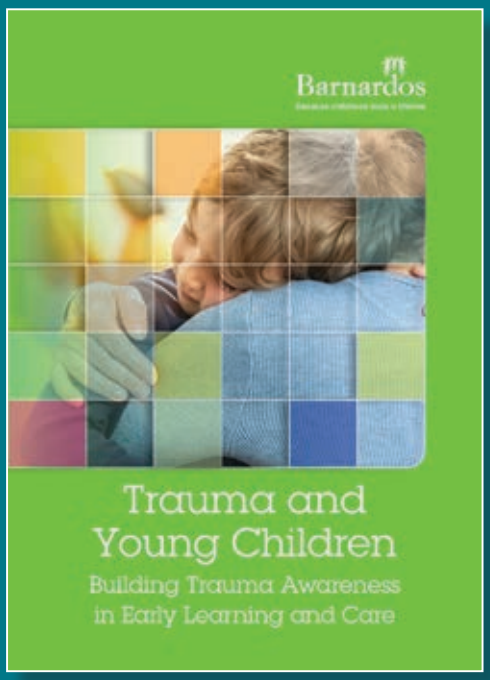

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