

10-23-2024

The Experiences of Men as a Gender Minority in Early Childhood Workplaces

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The Experiences of Men as a Gender Minority in Early Childhood Workplaces

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ED 590 Conducting Research and Completing the Capstone

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October 12, 2024

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Abstract

Men comprise a small percentage of the early childhood education and care workforce worldwide. Men represent only three percent of the preschool workforce in the United States (US Bureau of Labor Statistics, Department of Labor, 2023). A review of the literature revealed challenges men commonly face as a gender minority in a female-dominated field. These challenges include the transgression of traditional beliefs about masculinity, structural barriers like low pay and poor working conditions, and workplace challenges like exclusion, double standards, gatekeeping, and suspicion of sexual threat. Research showed that men can contribute to the field through pedagogic practices that support child development, such as risky play, and that the presence of men can enhance workplace diversity. In order to build a higher proportion of men in the field, findings identified ways to support men through targeted recruitment and retention efforts. Studies found that men benefit from adopting the identity of the professional. Workplace leaders can support teachers when they cultivate greater gender awareness in the workplace. Synthesis of the findings concluded that greater sensitivity to gender dynamics in early childhood workplaces paired with supportive actions would increase the recruitment and retention of men in the field.

Keywords: early childhood education (ECE), childcare, gender, male, men

Chapter One: Introduction

Men participate in early childhood education and care (ECEC) in much smaller proportions than women. According to the 2023 Labor Force Statistics from the Current Population Survey, the occupation of preschool and kindergarten teachers had the second lowest percentage of male employees—three percent—across 566 occupations surveyed in the United States. Men comprised only six percent of the childcare workforce, the occupation with the sixth-lowest percentage of men (US Bureau of Labor Statistics, Department of Labor, 2023). As a minority in a highly gender-segregated field, male educators experience unique challenges to their sense of self and professional well-being that can deter them from considering, entering, or remaining in the field.

Various reasons have been given for increasing the low proportion of men in ECEC, including addressing labor shortages (Thorpe et al., 2018), providing role models of healthy masculinity to children (Bonnett & Wade, 2022), challenging gender stereotypes (Warin et al., 2020), connecting with fathers of students (Thorpe et al., 2018), offering unique pedagogical perspectives in classroom and childcare settings (Sandseter, 2014), and adding diversity of perspectives to teaching teams (Thorpe et al., 2018). Without an understanding of the deterrents men in ECEC face, efforts to increase male participation are unlikely to succeed. However, a thorough appreciation of male teachers' experiences could result in improved experiences that boost the well-being of male workers, reducing attrition and preventing burnout in a field that suffers from both (Bonnett & Wade, 2022).

Notions of gender determine which behaviors and occupations are acceptable for men. Traditional beliefs about gender presume that caring for young children is a natural ability of women (Warin, 2019). The field is gender-coded as "women's work" and unsuitable for a man.

Men reported feeling discouraged from pursuing a career in the field by friends and family (Bonnett & Wade, 2022).

Men also encounter challenges within the workplace due to gender. Challenges include exclusion and isolation, double standards involving workplace responsibilities, and greater scrutiny of behavior by administrators, parents, and colleagues. Suspicion of sexual abuse is a potent workplace challenge, and male teachers worry far more than female teachers about suspicion of abuse. The GenderEYE study found that 51% of male teachers in England (compared to six percent of female teachers) have considered leaving the profession out of fear of allegations of sexual abuse (Warin et al., 2020).

The literature documents the contributions of male participation in the field as well. Studies show that children benefit from engaging in risky play, including developing confidence or risk assessment skills, and men are more likely to support this pedagogical strategy than women (Sandseter, 2014). Men provide alternative perspectives to teaching teams, increasing workplace diversity (Thorpe et al., 2018). Future studies may research additional benefits to children due to greater gender diversity among teachers and caregivers.

Research has identified specific supports to enhance recruitment and retention of men. Findings indicate that male educators new to the field benefit from targeted support like mentoring (Sullivan et al., 2020). Men can avoid being characterized as *male* teachers by adopting the gender-neutral identity of the early childhood professional in order to resist othering (Heikkilä & Hellman, 2015). Administrators can adopt a gender-aware (as opposed to gender-blind) perspective to address the impact of gender differences among their teams (Warin, 2019).

Scope

This paper examined literature from the last ten years that focused on men who work in early childhood education and care occupations with children ages birth through kindergarten. The studies in this paper are limited to the men's experiences in Western countries (the United States, Europe, and Australia), so conclusions cannot be generalized to the global early childhood workforce in Asia, Africa, or Latin America.

Teachers and childcare providers may identify with a gender category outside the traditional binary understanding of "male" or "female." These teachers may have identities like *gender non-conforming*, *non-binary*, *gender fluid*, or *transgender*, among others, so it is essential to highlight that this paper reviews literature that employed the biological sex labels "male" and "female" as well as the socially constructed gender labels "men" and "women." The following discussion is not an endorsement of the concept of the gender binary. However, the narrow focus on men and women excludes the experiences of people who do not identify with these categories.

Conclusion

Men are a gender minority in the highly gender-segregated field of ECEC. With so few men employed in the field, children lack exposure or direct experience with broader expressions of gender in early care settings. Men suffer from gender expectations that discourage them from entering ECEC and workplace challenges that negatively impact their experiences as teachers and caregivers. This literature review examined how gender dynamics can affect the experiences of male teachers in early childhood education and care to address best practices and programming in the field. The primary focus of this literature review is on the nuanced experiences of men in the field so that administrators can better support teams that include men.

The following chapter reviews research that examined the experiences of men who have chosen early childhood as a career path, men's contributions to the field, and strategies that were found to aid recruitment and retention.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Men who work in early childhood education and care (ECEC) occupations may experience a variety of challenges due to gender that contribute to low rates of participation in the field. This chapter reviews the literature that explores issues men face around negotiating gender identity in a female-dominated profession (McDonald et al., 2024). Research also identified negative ECEC workplace dynamics for men, including exclusion (Tennhoff et al., 2015), scrutiny (Warin et al., 2020), double standards (Cole et al., 2019), and suspicion of sexual threat (Hedlin et al., 2018). Research has also identified benefits to male participation in the field, including contributions to pedagogy (Sandseter, 2014) and increasing workplace diversity (Thorpe et al., 2020). Finally, research suggested recommendations for more effective recruitment and retention of men, such as targeted support for male teachers early in their careers (Sullivan et al., 2023), and ways men can maintain resilience despite gender-based challenges, such as adopting the identity of the gender-neutral professional (Nentwich et al., 2013).

Obstacles to Male Participation

As a gender minority, entering a field regarded as "women's work" can complicate men's understanding of their gender identity (Sargent, 2005, p. 251). Identity dissonance has implications for the personal experiences of men in the ECEC workplace. In addition, men encounter challenges to employment in structural barriers that also affect women in the field. Men also face unique occupational challenges related to their gender minority status, such as exclusion, double standards, gatekeeping, and perceived sexual threat.

Challenges to Gender Identity

The *essentialist* view of gender posits that gender differences between men and women have a biological basis and that men and women have complementary innate capabilities that the

other gender lacks (Levanon & Grusky, 2016). Under the essentialist view women are inherently predisposed to traits beneficial to working with children, such as patience, gentleness, and love (Sargent, 2005). Men are believed to be lacking in these traits, so men doing women's work could be considered transgressive. Since patriarchal societies devalue women's work, it would also be considered beneath a man's status to care for young children. Some may question men's suitability as early childhood teachers or caregivers due to expectations of men's gender performance. Thus, men considering entering the field of education may disregard the option of early childhood out of fear of losing social status or feeling emasculated (Warin, 2014).

Men report discouragement from entering the field from friends and family members, especially objections from their fathers (Bonnett & Wade, 2022). Beliefs about masculinity offer men a sense of identity, so choices that challenge traditional masculinity can be experienced as a kind of gender vertigo (Connell, 1995). Men who enter the field encounter a dilemma about how to express masculinity: traditional masculine traits like dominance or independence are inappropriate in the ECEC context, but adopting more feminine traits, like tender physical touch, invites questions about their masculinity, sexuality, or concerns about pedophilia (McDonald et al., 2024).

Sargent's study examines the extent to which early childhood education is gendered and the implications for men and their conception of masculinity (2005). This study interviewed 54 men, over half of whom were White. Subjects ranged in age from early 20s to late 50s. The subjects had between one and 30 years of professional experience. Using Acker's theories of gendered organizations (1992), the author analyzed interview transcripts for symbolic representation of gender, the location of men and women within the structural organization, the

internal mental workings around gender, and the interactions among the individuals. The author also examined Connell's typology of masculinities (1995), which includes:

- *Hegemonic masculinity*, which normalizes the belief in men's dominance over women;
- *Subordinate masculinity*, behaviors that question or threaten hegemonic masculinity;
- *Marginalized masculinity*, in which privilege is fluid because a man also possesses some intersectional trait that may be subject to prejudice, such as race or class, and
- *Complicit masculinity*, or practices that do not embody hegemonic practices but are still acceptable under the particular gender regime.

Sargent found that men in ECEC attempted to embody the subordinate form of masculinity but were confined by the gender regime of the early childhood establishment culture around gender (Sargent, 2005). Men received conflicting messages about expectations of their role in school settings: Men should embody traditional masculine traits, such as being stoic disciplinarians for boys, but should display alternative forms of masculinity for girls, like being gentle and empathetic. In addition, men felt heavily scrutinized as suspected potential sexual threats against children for choosing a career that does not align with gender norms. This study illuminated the social environment and gender dynamics faced by men in the field, including the paradoxes, scrutiny, and various forms of masculinity.

Workplace Challenges

Men in ECEC face several workplace challenges that complicate decisions to enter or stay in the field, including structural barriers, othering, double standards, gatekeeping behavior, and perceived sexual threat. The literature on these topics is discussed below.

Structural Barriers

Low pay is one structural barrier that has been found to discourage men from entering the field (Thorpe et al., 2018). Men may pursue job opportunities based on status, while women have been historically expected to accept lower pay and worse working conditions (McDonald et al., 2016). Female-dominated occupations have historically featured inequitable rates of pay and benefits. ECEC also features additional structural barriers, including difficult workplace conditions, high turnover rates, and limited advancement options (McDonald et al., 2016). Men may be significantly deterred by these structural barriers (Thorpe et al., 2018). In one study, women reported finding work in ECEC intrinsically rewarding, unlike men, whom the female subjects believed sought external rewards like higher pay and opportunities for advancement (McDonald et al., 2024). Because of structural barriers, men may remain an untapped labor pool when early childhood centers and childcare businesses face labor shortages (Sullivan et al., 2023). Female educators have advocated for changes to pay and status for years, but meaningful improvements are a long-term issue to address (Sullivan et al., 2023).

Exclusion

In gender-segregated workplaces like ECEC, there is a risk of exclusion leveled against the gender minority (Sullivan et al., 2023). Exclusion is a frequent feature of male participation in the field. For example, men have reported being expected to fulfill conventional gender roles like disciplinarian or handyman. At the same time, female colleagues believed men had limited capacity and skills to care for young children (Bonnett & Wade, 2022). Men in the field can experience treatment as tokens of their gender or can be valorized as "special" men or substitute fathers. Female teachers have been reported to describe their male colleagues as lazy, irresponsible, and lacking professionalism (Sullivan et al., 2023). For example, in one study, a

male teacher portrayed outdoor play as professional work, while female colleagues diminished its importance as mere fun (Sullivan et al., 2023). Male teachers can be tokenized as examples of stereotypical masculinity for children of single mothers, for example, rather than valued as integral members of a teaching team (Bonnett & Wade, 2022).

A qualitative study by Heikkilä and Hellman (2015) examined the perspectives on the workplace held by male preservice teachers in Sweden. The study performed a thematic analysis on the transcripts from interviews of the subjects. The participants included 38 men from three Swedish universities who were enrolled in a preschool teacher training program (note that in Sweden, preschool is for children ages 1-6 years old). The universities were located in larger cities, and the authors noted a risk of bias because the participants were already committed to their field of choice. Themes and patterns in the transcripts revealed that while some of the men felt like they were in demand because of their gender, each of the participants expressed concerns over the risk of being viewed as a pedophile, especially by parents of children. The dueling messages revealed a conflicting tension between feeling both welcome and unwelcome in the profession (Heikkilä & Hellman, 2015). A related study found that men describe feelings of "fear, threat, judgment, and alienation" when they enter the field (Sullivan et al., 2023, p. 29).

Double Standards

Male teachers and caregivers reported experiencing suspicion around toileting and physical contact and cited this as one double standard experienced with female colleagues (Cole et al., 2019). When men work in the ECEC, they are frequently assigned responsibilities based on essentialist beliefs about their gender, such as being paired with children with behavioral challenges or being assigned maintenance duties. Meanwhile, men are restricted from routines

that women are not, like changing diapers or assisting with toileting. Moreover, unlike women, men report having to modulate their physical contact with children (Bonnett & Wade, 2022).

As the dominant gender in the field, one study explored women's explanations as to why so few men enter the field of early care. A qualitative study in Australia interviewed 96 female educators from across early childhood settings in urban, regional, and remote locations (McDonald et al., 2024). The subjects in the study varied by age (under 21 to over 50), years in the field (less than one to more than 10), role in the workplace, and employment type. Three discursive frames were identified that revealed that gendered norms and stereotypes remain strong:

- Others view men with suspicion.
- Men lack the capacities required in the field.
- Early education and care do not fulfill men's career aspirations.

These stereotypes that relied on traditional gender norms were observed irrespective of seniority, age, or geographic region. Female subjects said men are deficient in competencies needed for early childhood teaching roles, including "tolerance, patience, the ability to multi-task and handle stress, and the ability to attach and connect to children emotionally" (McDonald et al., 2024, p. 521). This study reveals how men face adverse expectations about their performance by their female colleagues.

Gatekeeping

In a highly gendered workplace, members of the gender majority can serve as gatekeepers that enforce the majority's standards and beliefs on the gender minority (Sargent, 2005). In a 2022 qualitative study in Australia, researchers interviewed ten men working in two early childhood centers whose staff had 20% male staff, ten times the national and international

proportion of men in the field (Sullivan et al., 2023). Since men are typically dispersed across centers and usually find themselves the only man on their team, this study allowed researchers to examine the effects of men clustered together to find out how the experience of having male colleagues differs from the experience of being the only male staff member. Ten men participated in the study, all with male supervisors, another anomaly in the field. The subjects' ages ranged from 25 to 35, and the level of education ranged from certification to bachelor's degree. The study noted that typical workplace gender dynamics remain, even in centers with more men. Men in the field frequently experience female colleagues as gatekeepers and surveillants of their work.

Although many men cite female colleagues as being genuine advocates for the inclusion of men, some of these same women attributed negative beliefs of others as commonplace and unchallenged: questions about competence and suitability, masculinity, and risk that serve as potent beliefs that color the workplace experience for men (Sullivan et al., 2020).

Perceived Sexual Threat

Men confront contradictory messages about physical contact with children. On the one hand, early childhood caregiver performance is judged based on their ability to express care through touch, including behaviors like feeding, lap sitting, nose-wiping, or offering a comforting touch. On the other hand, men must constantly remain vigilant to ensure that any physical contact is appropriate and cannot be misconstrued as abuse (Brody, 2015). Male teachers modify how they express affection in order to reduce perceived suspicion that they are a risk to children by engaging in sexualized abusive behavior. For example, men may substitute a high five for a hug to distance themselves from suspicion because the enhanced level of

perceived scrutiny and suspicion is not worth the risk to their livelihoods and reputations (Cole et al., 2019).

A qualitative study by Hedlin et al. (2018) in Sweden interviewed 17 male and 33 female preschool teachers; 30 were experienced in the field, and 20 had recently joined the field. Subjects were questioned about touch and physical contact as a part of the job. Researchers determined two broad characterizations of men in the field, the "fun guy" and "possible perpetrator," although there was nuance to men's interaction with these labels (Hedlin et al., 2018, p. 101). Men may take up the fun guy persona eagerly or reluctantly, while some reject it. Men approach the possible perpetrator position by positioning themselves as physically cautious men, safe men, someone who no longer notice being suspected of pedophilia, someone who adopt traditional masculine identities, and someone who view women themselves as threats. Male teachers new to the field can feel pressure from children and parents to adopt a fun guy persona. However, men sometimes fear that the fun guy position may hurt them professionally in the long run by pigeonholing their reputation as unserious or unprofessional (Hedlin et al., 2018).

Male educators are perceived as dangerous because society suffers from moral panic about their sexual motives (Tufan, 2018). Men who choose to work with young children may be suspected of being homosexual, pedophile, or deviant. Men's sexual motives are questioned as a result of firmly established stereotypes of men as sexual predators (Heikkilä & Hellman, 2017). In fact, according to Sargent's study (2005), suspicion of sexual threat was the single most significant barrier to greater male participation in the field. One of the interview respondents in the study remarked, "Women's laps are places of love. Men's are places of danger" (Sargent, 2005, p. 254), highlighting a double standard due to moral panic that male teachers confront.

Even though substantiated reports of child sexual abuse have declined (Tufan, 2018), male educators are "guilty of association, because of their gender, and thus endure the consequences of crimes to which they are not associated" (Bonnett & Wade, 2020, p. 189). While beliefs about the sexual motives of men in ECEC are disproportionate to reported instances of sexual misconduct (Sullivan et al., 2020), one of the most potent challenges for men in the field is negotiating how physical contact with children, which is a routine part of the job, activates fears of potential sexual child abuse. For many men, reducing suspicion becomes a daily activity to prove and maintain their innocence to parents, colleagues, and supervisors (Nentwich, 2013). For example, a male teacher may stress to parents that he is a father and a family man (Hedlin et al., 2018), using this aspect of identity to strategically suggest that he is not a threat.

Women employed in ECEC confirmed that a widespread belief that men pose risks of sexual abuse to young children persists. However, these female colleagues distanced themselves from this view, asserting that parents, society, and the media hold this view. The women reasoned that preventing men from assisting with diaper changing and toileting was a way to protect their male colleagues (McDonald et al., 2024). Meanwhile, men noted the higher stakes for men because their professional reputation and livelihoods are at risk, adding cautiousness to their teaching practices that prevent men from engaging in effective pedagogic practices in the workplace (Cole et al., 2019). Perceived suspicions of molestation, abuse, and sexual threat remain a significant challenge for men in the ECEC workplace.

Positive Outcomes of Male Participation

Many male teachers report deep satisfaction from their work despite the challenges they face as a gender minority. Despite the experiences of scrutiny and suspicion, male teachers assert

their pride in profoundly impacting the lives of children and families (Reich-Shapiro et al., 2021). Research has identified positive outcomes of the presence of a man in ECEC. These include contributions to instruction and enhancing workplace diversity.

Contributions to Pedagogy

While more pedagogical similarities than differences exist between male and female educators, research has revealed meaningful pedagogical differences between men and women. Some male teachers revealed a different approach from female colleagues to classroom management philosophy, like encouraging young children to explore, express independence, and be more physically active (Reich-Shapiro et al., 2021). Men in ECEC more commonly embrace *risky play* that involves challenges, testing limits and boundaries, and exploring feelings of thrill, excitement, and risk of injury (Sandseter, 2014). In a quantitative study on educators' perception of risky play, Sandseter analyzed questionnaires and personality inventories focused on excitement-seeking traits to assess teacher attitudes about children's risk-taking behaviors. 116 Norwegian early childhood educators participated in the study, of which 20% were male, and 69% were under age 40. The study found that men encouraged excitement-seeking play more than women, and men showed a more "liberal attitude towards risky play than women" (Sandseter, 2014, p. 434). The results underscore the different values and levels of comfort men and women have with risky play. As a gender minority, men may feel pressured by women to conform to women's attitudes about safety (Sandseter, 2010). Female gatekeeping of male pedagogy involving risky play has been documented (Thorpe et al., 2018). However, male teachers may uniquely contribute to the well-being of children in their care, guided by research to achieve the best outcomes for children.

Men also adopt an ethic of care in their work with children. A cross-cultural analysis examined how men in ECEC cope with perceived threats to masculinity by entering a female-dominated career (Brody, 2015). In a qualitative study interviewing six male early childhood teachers from England, Israel, the Netherlands, Norway, Switzerland, and the United States, the researcher sought to understand how classroom practices reflect men's gender construction. The six men in the study ranged in age from 30 to 50 years old, had a range of experience from seven to 27 years, and ranged in training levels from two-year certificate to master's degree. Observations and transcripts of interviews were analyzed to identify commonalities in responses. The research found that men adopted an ethic of care across cultures to guide their teaching practice. This ethic included appropriate touching, the importance of play for learning, physicality (like rough and tumble play), and styles of interaction with children, such as using charisma and promoting independence. The author posited that comfort in their masculine identity helps teachers maintain longevity in the profession. However, this study focused on veteran teachers, and novice teachers may demonstrate different outcomes. However, given the small sample size, the study's results cannot be generalized.

Increased Workplace Diversity

Male teachers in ECEC have been reported to share new ideas and perspectives in the classroom with both curriculum and instruction and to enrich the diversity of perspectives in teaching teams (Thorpe et al., 2018). In a 2020 Australian study, interviews were conducted with the staff of two centers, each of which had a man on their staff (23 individuals total). It included staff in varied roles aged 18 to 53 years old, with educational levels between diploma to four-year degrees (Thorpe et al., 2018). Guiding questions included "To what extent was each male educator *included* in the centre [sic] teaching-team?" and "What were the *contributions* of

each male educator in the centre [sic] teaching-team?" (Thorpe et al., 2018, p. 925).

Sub-questions addressed the topics of suspicion, exclusion from participation in workplace duties, and contributions to the workplace, children, and families. Three themes emerged from the analysis of the transcripts. Despite inevitable otherness, inclusion was embraced by female staff. The men were valued for having unique perspectives and positively influencing relationships with families and colleagues. Gender was absent in the discussion about pedagogy. Researchers noted that while male identity may account for differing perspectives between male and female staff, there was considerable difference in style and contributions between the men interviewed. In a separate study, women praised their male colleagues for certain perceived benefits that men brought to the workplace, like high-energy play, role modeling opportunities, and an additional perspective in a heavily female workforce (McDonald et al., 2014).

Recruitment and Retention Efforts

As a gender minority facing unique barriers and challenges, targeted support can help recruit and retain male educators (Bonnett & Wade, 2022). Men who are new to the field require higher levels of support than more experienced teachers. Men who are more experienced in the field find that adopting a more gender-neutral identity—one based on professionalism—builds greater resilience than embracing the identity of the explicitly male teacher (Nentwich et al., 2013). Increasing the proportion of men in a program does not automatically resolve challenges men experience or create greater gender equality. Instead, research by Warin (2019) has found that programs that adopt a gender-aware model of employee engagement provide better outcomes than programs that attempt to emphasize sameness and act in a gender-blind manner.

Recruitment of Men

One study sought to identify what draws men to the field and helps them stay committed to their work (Bonnett & Wade, 2022). The qualitative study interviewed three male teachers between the ages of 27 and 53 who had eight or more years of professional experience. The men were posed questions like "What motivated you to pursue a career in early childhood education and care?" "As a man do you feel that there are specific challenges or benefits that accompany your work in a profession that is predominantly occupied by women?" and "What do you think needs to happen to interrupt the gender barriers that men face to increase participation?" (Bonnett & Wade, 2022, pp. 192-193). Analysis of the responses identified thematic similarities, including men feeling drawn to the career, having their career choice questioned or challenged by others, being expected to fulfill traditional gender roles in the workplace, being met with apprehension prior to being accepted, feeling the need to protect oneself, and needing support. The small number of subjects means that findings cannot be generalized. The authors noted the role of preservice teacher preparation programs in disrupting gendered notions of ECEC before men and women enter the field (Bonnett & Wade, 2022). These efforts could help nurture incoming professionals to be sensitive to gender dynamics.

A separate study sought to identify the issues that impact the recruitment and retention of male educators (Cole et al., 2019). A two-year study examined the experiences of male educators in New York City at various public, private, and non-profit workplaces serving neighborhoods from various economic levels. Of the 81 subjects offered questionnaires, 46 respondents replied, providing quantitative and qualitative data for the researchers. Sixteen of those men then participated in interviews. The subjects identified the pride in being labeled a male role model that helped them justify working in a lower-paying, lower-status career. Men reported

ambivalence about asserting masculine qualities, like being a disciplinarian, that are often expected of them. Targeted recruitment efforts, especially among African American and Latino male teachers, were recommended, in addition to professional development training for administrators and support groups for men in the field.

Despite the apprehension some ECEC programs may feel about hiring men on their teams, some men found a demand for male teachers that could be seen as a positive result of their gender-minority status. Direct experience with preschool education, such as through internships, was documented to be a catalyst for the participants to consider and choose the field, and this can be considered one tool to boost male participation in the profession (Heikkilä & Hellman, 2015). Authentic experiences with young children may help men see themselves in a future teaching role.

A study by Reich-Shapiro (2021) tried to identify what men in ECEC valued in their roles and how they adapted their own beliefs about masculinity to suit a career in a highly gendered field. Researchers studied strategies that result in greater gender balance in the ECEC workforce, focusing on how men thought about the influence of their work with young children and how that shaped curriculum and impacted how children understand gender roles. Subjects included 46 U.S. male educators ages 18 to 64, serving in the field for years and in various positions at various ECEC settings (public and privately funded). Researchers used questionnaires, interviews with the subjects' supervisors, interviews with 15 subjects, and a focus group with six of the initial pool of subjects. Six key themes were identified in the data:

- Men experience the complexity of intersectional identity.
- Men believe that their presence challenges conventional stereotypes.
- Men experience suspicion and bias.

- Men identify pedagogic differences than women.
- Male educators serve as positive role models about gender.
- Men identify personal and professional satisfaction in their choice of career.

The men in the study stress the belief that men in ECEC create "a catalyst for change in the culture" (Reich-Shapiro et al., 2021, p. 396), so intentional efforts at recruitment are warranted. In addition, the men described a career that is fulfilling, countering beliefs that ECEC is a low-status profession and suggesting that efforts need to be made to change public perception.

Targeted Support for New Male Educators

Research shows that male educators who are new to the field may struggle more than experienced male educators due to their gender. Thus, they can benefit from targeted support in this critical stage of their careers. New male educators reported critical benefits of receiving mentorship support from individual colleagues in the early phases of their careers, regardless of the mentor's gender (Sullivan et al., 2020). Female educators can also serve as genuine advocates for their male colleagues, leading to greater feelings of support, enjoyment, and job satisfaction among men (Thorpe et al., 2018).

One study by Wilkinson and Warin (2022) found that only 9.5% of men in the United Kingdom work in ECEC settings with more than one man. The presence of a male colleague normalized the presence of men. It reduced the conspicuousness of being a gender minority, although the presence of another man benefited new teachers more than veteran teachers. Buddying and mentoring strategies likewise appeared to benefit novice male practitioners. The study shows that male-to-male support may be most effective at critical moments in a male

professional's career, such as entrance into the field, starting in a new setting, or working under the supervision of a new manager.

Professional Identity

When men enter a field considered contrary to their gender, they confront a need to justify their presence (Sargent, 2005). Themes in the transcripts of the Heikkilä & Hellman study (2015) revealed that male preschool teachers in training frequently left previous work and careers that the men did not find meaningful. Men saw themselves as professional educators and not explicitly "male" preschool teachers. Men also cited the joy and pleasure of their work and the intellectual challenge of working with young children and their families. They also noted pride in the profound importance of their work to child development (Sullivan et al., 2023). Furthermore, men who entered female-dominated occupations tended to be more "gender-progressive," enabling them to resist losing status or threats to their identity (McClintock, 2018, p. 170). Research has examined the postures men adopt that help them feel like they belong in the field.

Men sometimes highlight differences or similarities with their female colleagues to justify their presence in ECEC settings—or reject comparisons altogether. A qualitative study by Nentwich et al. (2013) interviewed nine male and seven female childcare workers in German-speaking Switzerland, where childcare workers receive professional training through three-year apprenticeships and are generally employed in private centers. Researchers examined interview transcripts to identify discursive strategies men use to navigate identity dissonance in these settings. The study found that men justified their presence by engaging in practices that emphasized difference, like occupying a "male niche" of masculine identity in a female-dominated occupation, adopting the symbolic role of "father" the way a female colleague

might adopt the role of "mother," or positioning themselves as a "male breadwinner" and seeking career advancement, however limited the options may be (Nentwich et al., 2013, p. 332).

Alternatively, men might emphasize sameness with women, either by promoting equality among all staff regardless of gender or by appropriating feminine traits, like claiming to be nurturing and calm. Finally, men might eschew difference or sameness and instead describe gender-neutral professionalism as a pedagogue. Researchers noted that the practices had varied outcomes, but none of them had stable results, so men must constantly maneuver among the practices to prove to themselves that male teachers belong in ECEC. The practice that enabled the greatest feelings of belonging among men was that of the pedagogue. However, that perspective may only be available to more experienced teachers and more difficult for newer male teachers to adopt (Nentwich et al., 2013).

A study in Switzerland examined how men position gender and professionalism in the early childhood workplace. The study sought to understand how men negotiated being a "wanted other" who possessed competencies their female colleagues lacked due to their gender and being an "unwanted other" who was risky and dangerous to children (Tennhoff et al., 2015, p. 341).

Both of these positions are prevalent attitudes men face that reinforce traditional gendered attitudes within early education and care. The subjects in the study included ten male and eight female childcare colleagues in Switzerland who had completed vocational training. The study sought female subjects who started employment without a male colleague but eventually gained one to measure any changes to the workplace experience that the women cited. The study found that to counteract the unwanted other, men can adopt the professional position. The identity of the professional allowed male teachers and caregivers to reconcile the contradiction between masculinity and their line of work in a female-dominated occupation. Men sometimes

highlighted their professionalism or the benefits of their pedagogy, such as the promotion of rough-and-tumble play, or framed their work as highly demanding and, as a gender minority, avant-garde. However, the authors cautioned about efforts to legitimize the inclusion of men at the expense of denigrating women's skills, experiences, and values in the workplace (Tenhoff et al., 2015).

Gender Awareness

Researchers have noted that setting numerical goals for recruiting more men can normalize binary thinking and that numerical balance is not equivalent to workplace equality (McDonald et al., 2024). Lack of sensitivity about gender leads to *gender blindness*, or "the failure to recognise [sic] that gender is an essential determinant of social outcomes impacting on projects and policies" (Warin, 2019, p. 304).

While gender-specific support may benefit male teachers, Wilkinson and Warin's study (2022) raised questions about whether that type of support improves the retention of men in the field or results in greater division in the workforce based on gender. The study relied on data from the Gender in Early Years project ("GenderEYE"), a 26-month-long study seeking to understand the dearth of men in the field in England and the benefits of male participation and recruitment strategies. The GenderEYE study collected qualitative data using teacher/child observations performed by researchers over two to three days, interviews with stakeholders, and a survey of administrators. Data was collected in seven case study locations. The number of participants was not stated, nor was demographic data shared; the authors note that the study included both male and female participants. The regional nature of the study and the lack of information about the participants suggest that findings may not be universal. The study found a variety of single-sex support methods in use at the time, including classroom assignments,

same-sex manager/mentee arrangements, single-sex training groups, and single-sex support networks. Single-sex training courses had mixed results. The unrealistic nature of the environment compared to the real world was cited as a criticism.

On the other hand, these trainings provided exposure and information for a field that boys and men frequently do not consider. Single-sex support groups and networks drew a range of responses from male and female professionals, both positive and negative. One negative aspect identified was how such groups position men as homogenous. Overall, the GenderEYE study found that gender-specific support increased feelings of being different that men sought to avoid (Warin et al., 2020). However, gendered support is sometimes crucial to retaining male teachers when it provides opportunities for men to articulate troubles and fears and receive tailored guidance. Since the number of men in the field remains low, relying on managers and administrators to provide ad hoc support is sometimes insufficient, and external organizations that can provide targeted support may be more valuable. The authors stated that the emphasis of support should remain on shared experiences of inequality, not merely shared biological characteristics and that such strategies should be just one among several strategies to support educators (Wilkinson & Warin, 2022).

The idea of gender balance in the workplace is often based on the ideal of a heterosexual nuclear family (a father figure complements and completes a mother figure). This essentialist view reinforces traditional gender differences. Warin's study (2019) argued that gender essentialism should be replaced with *gender flexibility*, which allows teachers and staff of any gender to address tensions created by traditional gender norms and create a curriculum that is sensitive to gender instead of minimizing it. This approach allows men and women to express their gender in expansive, not restrictive, ways. In contrast, popular methods of supporting male

educators, such as men-only training, reinforce binary and essentialist thinking. This study was privately funded by a British company seeking to understand the impact of the relatively high presence of male staff in its nursery (approximately 20%). Researchers sought to understand the impact on children, parents, communities, and female coworkers, as well as the educational, emotional, and social impact, as well as the immediate, near future, and long-term impact. Researchers conducted two focus groups, one with male staff only and one with mixed gender, as well as observations. Positive impacts identified included improved workplace morale and relationships with parents, increased physical activity, and challenging the stereotypes understood by children. Due to the nature of care for young children, staff frequently and spontaneously take over tasks for one another, and staff need to have various skills and fill multiple roles without warning. A child-centered focus suggests teachers must be able to provide whatever a child needs at that moment and not rely on gendered attributes. The researchers concluded that gender-flexible teaching by men and women requires a gender-conscious pedagogy. This pedagogy can allow teachers to be responsive to the various expressions of gender in children, including transgender children. Researchers also noted that while single-sex support groups can be supportive for new educators, a blend of single-sex and mixed-sex groups is a more effective path for gender sensitivity training. Warin (2019) concluded that gender equality did not occur by merely hiring more men. Instead, workplaces benefited from gender sensitivity training and a gender-flexible pedagogy.

Conclusion

Research has shown ways in which men who work in the field of early childhood and care can have complicated experiences, both positive and negative. Men who choose early education and care as a career must rationalize what it means to transgress conventional gender

expectations. Structural barriers discourage men from joining the field. In the field of ECEC, male educators can be met with apprehension, isolation, double standards, low expectations, and suspicion of potential for sexual abuse. The accumulation of the unique stresses placed on men in the field, on top of the structural barriers previously mentioned, results in male educators experiencing the symptoms of burnout at higher rates than their female counterparts (Bonnett & Wade, 2022).

On the other hand, men identified strong reasons to enter and remain in the field, and research has identified positive outcomes from their participation. In order to support retention, research suggested that teams should adopt flexible gender roles to serve as a buffer to negative experiences men face (Warin, 2019). Men with more extensive experience in the field who adopted the identity of early childhood professionals appeared to be more resilient to the challenges common for men in ECEC. Men who are new to the field may be susceptible to unique stresses based on their gender and inexperience. However, they have been shown to benefit from targeted support through mentorship and supportive program policies (Wilkinson & Warin, 2022). The following chapter provides analysis and synthesis of the literature, examples of application of research findings, and suggests possible future studies.

Chapter Three: Discussion, Application, and Future Studies

The literature on men's experiences in early childhood education and care (ECEC) found several challenges from being a part of a gender minority in a highly segregated field (Sullivan et al., 2023). However, research found that men's presence can positively contribute to the ECEC workplace culture (Thorpe et al., 2018), and research has identified ways to recruit and retain men. This chapter will discuss the findings and suggest ways the findings can be applied, then offer recommendations for new areas of research that can bring greater clarity to this topic.

Discussion

The lack of men maintains the gendered notion that ECEC is "women's work." In addition, lower numbers of men in the field deter additional men from joining, creating a negative feedback loop. Higher ratios of men in the field would benefit teaching teams by reducing the "othering" effect of having men participate as teachers and caregivers, normalizing their presence, and subverting gender stereotypes about the suitability of men as caretakers of young children. Children could benefit from a broader representation of gender expression. Administrative staff could benefit from teams that are more tightly aligned and supportive, and potentially higher levels of job performance by their staff, lower turnover rates, and improved workforce stability. If schools and centers address structural barriers like low pay and poor working conditions to recruit and retain more men, both male and female staff would benefit. Finally, if cultural values about masculinity in the ECEC workplace improve, men themselves would likely benefit from reduced feelings of scrutiny, risk, sexual threat, exclusion, and tokenism, leading to higher overall job satisfaction, greater comfort, lower levels of work-related stress and burnout, and longer tenure in their roles as teachers and caregivers.

Findings highlight that the challenges of being a gender minority are acute for new male teachers who lack the experience to claim the identity of the professional, and being a man presents additional obstacles for prospective and new teachers than for those who have experience in the field.

Application

The findings from this literature review can be applied to modify program policies and hiring processes in order to support the recruitment and retention of men in the field. The literature suggests several possible applications for administrators, teaching teams, and direct support for men in the field.

Administrative and Policy Changes

One application of this area of research can impact the work of school and childcare administrators and supervisors in hiring, onboarding, and policy making. Hiring managers should explore their internal biases, for and against men, to ensure that men are neither discriminated against unfairly nor tokenized. Administrators should examine any personal biases used to screen male teacher candidates (Weaver-Hightower, 2011). Onboarding processes, program policies, and workplace professional codes of conduct should emphasize equal service and treatment regardless of gender to affirm that men belong in ECEC. Codified forms of affirmation would provide a backstop when parents or staff object to men's full participation in care routines. These policies would serve as a statement of commitment to diversity within an organization that offers male staff an additional layer of security and inclusion (Sullivan et al., 2022). Organizational leaders must be sensitive to the gendered language that frequently persists in workplace environments. Finally, administrators should receive training on gender sensitivity in the workplace to effectively support their team's diversity (Cole et al., 2019).

Professional Development and Team Building

School leaders can ensure staff receive professional development and team building around gender dynamics. Educating teachers and caregivers about gender flexible practices can help minimize the negative workplace experiences men frequently face, like exclusion, double standards, and gatekeeping. Likewise, training on gender flexibility can challenge beliefs about gender essentialism and open opportunities for men and women in ECEC to teach children effectively, which may be in opposition to traditional notions of gender. As noted earlier, researchers recommend a blend of single-sex support groups for men accompanied by training in mixed-gender groups (Wilkinson & Warin, 2022). In addition, issues related to expanding understanding of gender from the perspective of boys and men should be incorporated into anti-bias training.

Direct Support for Men

While the applications above can help improve the conditions of workplace culture to create a more welcoming environment for men, research shows that men also benefit from direct support at various times throughout their careers. Structural barriers in the field need to be addressed to make the field more attractive to men who are in the career discernment phase (McDonald et al., 2024), and opportunities for direct experience with children also help men consider careers in ECEC (Heikkilä & Hellman, 2015). Teacher training and education programs can create initiatives that further support the recruitment and retention of men (Bonnett & Wade, 2023). Mentorship, regardless of the gender of the mentor, appears to be critically supportive of new male teachers (Sullivan et al., 2022). As male teachers progress in their careers, mentors can encourage men to adopt a gender-neutral professional identity to legitimize their belonging (Heikkilä & Hellman, 2015).

Future Studies

Additional studies can add nuance and understanding to this topic. Future research may include learning about how the presence of men on teaching teams affects young children's understanding of gender, the nature of male privilege in female-dominated spaces like ECEC, and learnings from other fields with low proportions of male employees.

The Effect of Men on How Young Children Understand Gender

Most research on men in the field relies on adult subjects. Additional research on whether and how the presence of men in ECEC teams affects children's beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors should be explored. Parents experience fears about the safety or suitability of men in early care, but children do not share this fear (Bonnett & Wade, 2022). The study by Cole et al. (2019) claims that more men in ECEC occupations would offer young children more varied experiences with gender. However, research can reveal more about the impacts of a more gender-diverse workforce on children, including their understanding of gender roles.

Male Privilege in Female-Dominated Spaces

While male privilege exists in many spheres of society, studies could explore how male privilege operates in a female-dominated workplace. Research can examine whether structural power imbalances (e.g., being the only man on a team with women or a man with a female supervisor) negate male privilege, amplify it, or have some other effect. Taylor (2010) notes that most supervisors in ECEC are women who may engage in behaviors like gatekeeping, scrutiny, and enforcing double standards. Studies can also show whether negative workplace discourse around men's roles in gender relations (such as sexual assault and harassment, the gender pay gap, or reproductive health care legislation) affects men in ECEC.

Lessons from Other Fields with Low Proportions of Men

Men's experiences in early care and education can be compared to other gender-atypical roles. Future studies could explore the nuanced experiences of men in other female-dominated fields, including legal secretaries, speech-language pathologists, and dental assistants (US Bureau of Labor Statistics, Department of Labor, 2023). Men generally feel lower perceived meaningfulness than women in female-dominated occupations (Qian & Fan, 2018). However, since men in ECEC report high levels of commitment to their career (Brody, 2015), male teachers may experience greater resilience, so lower perceived meaningfulness may not be the same for men in ECEC. Some parents, teachers, or administrators may embrace the inclusion of more men and react positively to the inclusion of a man in a classroom or childcare setting, buffering negative experiences like self-doubt.

Conclusion

The study by Sullivan et al. (2022) concludes that "simply recruiting more men is insufficient to ensure a positive and harmonious workplace where men and women working as educators stay and thrive" (p. 30). Tensions around gender remain if they are not explicitly addressed. Warin (2019) argues for gender awareness to explicitly address pervasive essentialist views of gender that negatively impact men in the workplace. Practitioners, regardless of their gender, need to exhibit gender-flexible versatility to meet children's needs (McDonald et al., 2024). Recruiting men into more ECEC programs is essential in challenging traditional views of gender and expanding notions of gender expression among men.

The percentage of men in early education and care is meager and has remained low. Structural barriers like low pay and poor working conditions can be improved, and societal opinions about masculinity and male gender expression can broaden to accept men as safe and

capable caregivers who belong with young children. As a likely result, the number of men in early childhood education and care will increase, and the experiences of those men will improve.

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