

Man enough?

Why is it important to get more men as practitioners in the early years? What can we learn from other countries? *Jo Warin* shares her research on practices and attitudes around the world

In February this year, there was, in Southampton, an exciting and very forward-looking national conference on men in the early years. It was entitled *Early Years: A Career for Everyone* and was attended by many early years practitioners, especially men. Indeed, the few women who were present, myself included, got a taste of what it is like to be in a small minority.

Coupled with this, there has been a recent upsurge in the numbers of local and regional UK networks of male early years professionals sharing this interest – for example, the Bristol Men in Early Years Network, the Southampton Area Men in Early Years network (see box) and Tower Hamlets Men in Childcare Forum.

In addition, a few pre-school settings have developed a critical mass of male staff – for example, St Edmund's Nursery School and Children's Centre in Bradford and West Cambridge Day Nursery. A national campaign has recently been announced, #MITEY (Men in the Early Years), led by the Fatherhood Institute.

The research I have undertaken over many years into domestic practices of fathers, combined with the public roles of men as early years practitioners, leads me to cheer on these developments with enthusiasm. This drive creates the potential for men to behave in a variety of caring ways



with children, increasing the range of learning activities that will most benefit them. David Bartlett, co-founder of the Fatherhood Institute, has recently written a report called *Men in Childcare*, in which he notes that men's inclusion in early years can help to develop 'a diversity of caring'.

However, I also feel a concern that some of the strategies, and thinking,

Men's presence can help develop a 'diversity of caring'; below, Bristol Men in Early Years Network

behind the push for more men in early years can sometimes be misguided and can actually reinforce rather than challenge gender stereotypes. For example, during the early part of the millennium some 'Dads and lads' schemes tried to engage men in the education of young children through traditional 'men's interests'.

Unfortunately, this approach is based on a restricted idea of masculinity and does nothing to expand the repertoire of the many creative and gender-flexible ways in which men can respond to children. By way of contrast, a recent *Nursery World* star letter writer, Dale Parker, described his decision to dress as Princess Anna from the film *Frozen* because he wants to challenge gender expectations.

It seems a good moment to stand back and have a think about why we want more men in the early years

STRONGER CLARIFICATION

It seems a good moment to stand back and have a think about why we want more men in the early years and develop a much stronger clarification of the contribution they can make. Here ➤



MAIN PHOTOS AT PAINT POTS PORTSWOOD, SOUTHAMPTON CHRIS GORMAN

are some of the reasons I have seen in media debates, academic journals and at practitioner meetings:

- We need more men in early childhood education in order to help boys achieve.
- We need more men to complement women's roles as teachers.
- We need more men to discipline boys and girls.
- We need more men to work on the physical curriculum.

All these statements are problematic in their own ways and, taken together, they signal an underlying rationale that is based on gender difference and is therefore likely to reinforce gender stereotyping.

We need a really clear basis for the current exciting drive to draw more men into early years work and support them there. One of the most important reasons is the long-term aspiration of gender transformation, of changing from a society that is still ruled by strong gender stereotypes to one where these stereotypes are dissolved.

If you doubt that we live in a gendered world, I strongly recommend watching a provocative YouTube video featuring four-year-old Riley from the USA (www.youtube.com/watch?v=-CU040Hqbas). 'Why,' asks Riley in a tone of passionate outrage, 'do girls have to buy pink stuff and

boys buy superhero stuff?' She is shown standing in a highly gender-segregated toy store, where she also tells us that toy suppliers 'trick' children into buying the things that are marketed specifically for their gender group. This four-year-old's puzzlement speaks to us all in her recognition of how gendered her world is.

WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM OTHER COUNTRIES?

So, are there other countries that manage the recruitment and the retention of men better than we do? Can we copy what they do? As a researcher into gender issues in education, especially early childhood education, I began a personal research quest to find out.

What follows is a brief account of the practices, policies and underlying thinking in some of the countries that I have visited through some of the conversations I have had there with early childhood education practitioners and trainers. My quest has been quite opportunistic, a result of links with international researchers and research funded by the Swedish Research Council.

Sweden

In 2014 I had the good fortune to interview a group of Swedish male

They have a programme of inspirational lectures, often from male pre-school practitioners

pre-school practitioners in Gothenburg. One of the first things I learned from them was about Sweden's national curriculum (equivalent to the Early Years Foundation Stage), which states that 'the pre-school should counteract traditional gender patterns and gender roles'.

I was impressed that the men quoted this statement so readily and I also noted that they seemed very sensitive to gender issues. Karl and Linus had covered this as part of their training and were keen to describe the ways in which they very deliberately performed non-traditional, gender flexible practices in front of the children. For example, Karl told me that he believed it was important that the children should witness him changing nappies and Linus was deliberate in his intentions for the children to 'see me laying the table and doing everything that women teachers do'.

However, they also had the idea that men bring something specifically masculine and complementary to early childhood education. This particularly concerned the role of humour, playfulness and freedom. Per felt that male teachers were very popular with the children – 'Like a pop star swooping in' – while Jonas drew attention to his playfulness – 'I like to play with them. I'm a fun guy' – and Karl described his reason for becoming a pre-school practitioner: 'Cos I'm a kid'.

I was also lucky enough to be involved in a consultation with Swedish leaders of early childhood teacher training programmes to brainstorm ideas about how to recruit and retain more men. Inga Wernersson and her colleague Ingrid Granbom from Sweden's University West are now focusing their efforts on careers information to secondary school students.

They have a programme of inspirational lectures, often from male pre-school practitioners, intended to encourage young men and women into employment in early education. They are also working with secondary schools to get students to shadow pre-school staff and gain some 'hands-on' work experience.

Indonesia

Vina Adriany, head of the early childhood education training at the University of Education in Bandung, Indonesia, arranged for me to hold a focus group with male early years trainees. Several interesting findings



SOUTHAMPTON: STRIVING FOR CHANGE

The current two per cent (DfE, 2014) of men in the UK early years workforce is a figure that has persisted for many years, says David Wright, owner of Southampton nursery group Paint Pots and founder of the Southampton Area Men in Early Years (SAMEY) network.

'To address this gender imbalance, SAMEY aims to change culture at all levels, with:

- public opinion
- national policy
- attitudes and practice within individual settings
- the promotion of early years careers to children.

'Our national conference in February produced several outputs:

- A national men in early years charter, available to download from the #MITEY website (<http://bit.ly/2aSGnXk>)
- Podcasts recorded by delegates as examples of men making a difference in fulfilling roles in their early years careers (<http://bit.ly/2bfnuMp>)
- A set of proposals forwarded to Government:
 - An explicit national target for the percentage of men in the early years workforce

- A national organisation for the promotion of and support for men in early years
- A recognised UK national online presence for men in early years
- Funding for research into the difference a balanced gender early years workforce makes on children's outcomes
- A franchise model for local support organisations.'

Support for and promotion of a national charter for men in early years

'We resolve to continue the conversation – a national summit in London in October will bring together interested parties to consider how we move the national agenda forward (<http://bit.ly/2aQXntN>).

'With the recent announcement of our new minister's portfolio combining a remit for both early years and equality and the growing support for change, I am optimistic that we will see the UK take the lead in improving the gender balance in our early years workforce.'



emerged. Firstly, they had a strong pioneering zeal and felt that the government should be putting more money into the recruitment of men.

Secondly, they were ambitious and wanted to work their way through classroom teaching to managerial positions, and some had aspirations to work in higher education institutions so that they themselves could lead training for early childhood professional practice. In this respect, they were similar to some of the men who have been interviewed in western studies and who have been described as ambitious to 'fast track' to powerful professional positions.

Thirdly, they were influenced by the religious and cultural context of early childhood education, which has a strong idea about a person's 'kodrat', their natural instincts, including the gender roles of mothering and fathering, which are understood to be complementary rather than interchangeable.

Finally, they were aware of a cultural stigma surrounding homosexuality – for example, Zein said, 'A lot of people asked me, why do I take early childhood education? They asked me to be careful... so I am not turning

into [gesturing his hand in a stereotypical girly movement]'. Men entering into the teaching of young children in Indonesia may have to confront strong prejudices.

Japan

Colleagues Chie Nakazawa and Kiyomi Karamochi point out a distinctly Japanese concern with language registers and patterns for men and women. There are strong cultural norms regarding the proper way for men and women to speak to children and these are related to perceptions about children's needs at different ages.

Normal masculine ways of speaking are considered too commanding for the fruitful development of pre-school children in a country that has strong expectations of 'real men'. Men who choose to work in pre-school have to learn different ways of adapting their verbal and non-verbal responses to children.

The male practitioners described in the study undertaken by Chie and her colleagues were learning a more attentive and tender way of relating to young children and aiming to develop a new gender neutral set of practices. In Japan, there is a

**Graham Wigg
working with
children at Paint
Pots Portsmouth,
in Southampton**

developing enthusiasm to accept men into this previously female world of work, alongside national gender equality policies. Chie and Kiyomi report that 4 per cent of pre-school workers were male in 2010.

USA

A case study from USA researcher Sally Campbell Galman shows teachers, both men and women, regarding the role of the male early childhood educator as a tough disciplinarian.

The female work colleagues of male practitioners described in this study marvelled at the unusualness of their male colleagues in ways that actually reinforced their difference and maleness. Shelby, for example, a young female practitioner, described her experience of her male colleague: 'It was really neat to watch him interact with kids cause you wouldn't think of some big manly guy being a first grade teacher' (equivalent to UK Reception class). Jay, one of the male teachers in this study, said he was seen by his female colleagues to be a 'drill sergeant'.

Here, we find the idea that is also very prevalent in some UK discussions about the need for male role ➤

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POSITIVE RELATIONSHIPS MEN IN CHILDCARE

models to model traditional forms of masculinity, especially to provide tough discipline, which is seen to be particularly important for children who are lacking 'father figures'.

Given the findings from this study, it is unsurprising to consider that our UK Troops to Teachers initiative has been taken from the US. This approach is worrying because it leads to an even stronger emphasis on gender differences, a 're-gendering' of society, as it has been termed.

Germany

German gender equality policy is focusing on the goal of opening up new horizons for men and boys beyond traditional and restrictive masculine lifestyle concepts. The number of male early years trainees in vocational training is increasing – amounting to 17 per cent of the total during 2014/2015. Men involved in specialised programmes for job shifters is especially high: 52 per cent.

Tim Rohrmann, based in Germany, runs a special interest group on gender balance in the early childhood education workforce for the European Early Childhood Education Research Association. He reports that the percentage of men in early childhood education and care in Germany is about 5 per cent now (data for 2015), but explains that there are huge differences between regions, ranging from more than 10 per cent

in several big cities to less than 3 per cent in the federal state of Bavaria.

An interesting finding from the German network is that 'men go where there are other men'. This is perhaps unsurprising as men will feel less under the public gaze as a minority group. We know that men can be highly aware of their minority status, which marks them out for public scrutiny: 'You can feel you're like in a zoo if there isn't another male there', as one male practitioner from the north of England told me. We also know that men like the support of other male practitioners.

However, it does leave us with a very tricky 'chicken and egg' problem. How do we get a critical mass of men in an early childhood setting in the first place?

CONCLUSIONS

Differences between the more 'successful' countries and others can produce some conclusions. For example, there is no doubt that Norway is hailed as having had some noticeable success – for example, the 3 per cent figure in 1991 rose to 10 per cent in 2008, but here a lot of public money has been put into large-scale recruitment campaigns and there has been a legal responsibility for employers to work towards a target of 20 per cent of male staff.

The recruitment and retention of men is inextricably linked to other



MORE INFORMATION

- 'Gender Flexible Pedagogy in Early Childhood Education', by J Warin and V Adriany (2015). *Journal of Gender Studies*. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2015.1105738>
- *Men in Childcare*, Fatherhood Institute (2015)
- *Men, Masculinities and Teaching in Early Childhood Education: international perspectives*, by S Brownhill, J Warin and I Wernesson (2015). Routledge.

social policies. So it is no accident that we find that a country where this is successful also has parental leave policies and an infrastructure of gender egalitarian policies.

If, as early years professionals, we want to challenge gender stereotypes, we must first provide children with various alternatives, presented through our own practices and alongside the resources and learning experiences we create. This means that we must ourselves be highly attuned to gender issues and alert to the subtle and often invisible ways that traditional gender norms can persist.

Gender-flexible teaching can only be practised by teachers and carers who are gender aware rather than gender blind. This was something I particularly learned from Swedish pre-school staff who valued the training they had received in gender awareness. There is a crucial role for training here, both in pre-service training and continuing professional development.

It matters that we recruit and retain more male teachers in the early years education workforce as a way of transforming gender and dismantling strong gender stereotypes. ■

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COMMUNITY RELATIONS

St Edmund's is a maintained nursery school and runs a cluster of seven children's centres in West Bradford, writes executive head teacher Anne-Marie Merifield:

'We are a designated National Teaching School and run our own School Centred Initial Teacher Training Programme (SCITT), training 103 secondary, primary and Early Years Teachers during the last academic year.

'We employ three male practitioners and a male teacher to work with our two- to five-year-olds, a male practitioner one day a week who leads our forest school sessions, two male workers who work across our children's

centre cluster, a male family support worker, three men who work in our Teaching School/SCITT and various male students and volunteers.

'Our families and children need to be able to identify with our staff team. We feel it's really important that our school workforce represents the community in which we are based. It is an important part of our overall ethos, which includes age, gender and ethnicity.

'We have had male members of staff and volunteers for many years and that gives other men confidence to work in our organisation.

'Having male role models has enabled us to link more closely

with our dads and male carers and we are passionate believers in the importance of getting them involved in their child's learning and development.'

- *St Edmund's Nursery School and Children's Centre is planning to hold the next Men in Early Years Conference in Bradford, in June 2017*



Mohammed Bilal at St Edmunds