Men in Early Childhood Teaching


There needs to be some support for females working with males. I’ve been in situations where two female teachers have faced angry parents because they are having a man turn up at the kindergarten who they haven’t even met at that stage.... Some females [teachers] have difficulty working with the opposite gender or are not sure how to relate to a male as a teacher because they have always been around mostly women. (Denis, male teacher)

When James was first appointed to the job I felt that the Association could have warned me before James phoned. . . . There aren’t many of them [male teachers], and you think to yourself about whether he is going to be able to do baking and all these things that women do. I must say that in the beginning our relationship was rather strained. (Bridget, female head teacher)

As the above quotes suggest men are uncommon in early childhood settings and this can present problems. Male teachers may cause initial debate and even tension in early childhood services because by their very presence they are challenging social norms.

Men’s participation in early childhood teaching and the difficulties male teachers experience because of their sex need to be understood in context. Male teachers may have their masculinity questioned and perceived to be effeminate or gay due to the social belief that working with young children is not an appropriate occupation for men. Parents and employers may be more suspicious of the motives of men who choose to work with young children than women because of a view argued by some feminists that all men are potential child molesters and rapists. Further, the popular feminist slogan in the 1980s that “girls can do anything” was not matched by a similarly well-publicised message that “boys can do anything”. Hence one reason that women’s earnings continue to lag behind those of men is that men are not making sufficient entry into the lowest paid areas of women’s work, namely the care and education of young children.

Some traditionally female occupations such as nursing have become more gender neutral in recent years but early childhood teaching is one of the few occupations which has not experienced a significant change in gender balance. Over a decade ago being an air-hostess was seen to be an occupation for attractive


2 Suggested readings on issues surrounding male participation in teaching:


young women only. With a change in title from air-hostess to cabin crew member and deliberate policies by the two major domestic New Zealand airlines to change the sexist image of the occupation, approximately one in five cabin crew staff are now men. In contrast only about one in 100 teachers in the kindergarten and childcare services are male (Ministry of Education Statistics). In recent years the percentage of male to female teachers in childcare centres dropped from 2.6 percent in 1992 to 1.35 percent in 1998. There has been a nominal increase in male teacher participation in kindergartens from 0.7 percent in 1992 to 1.2 percent in 1998.

What has been happening in the early childhood sector, or more correctly what has not been happening, in regards to recruiting and supporting male teachers is also evidenced in the primary school sector. In 1971, 37.8 percent of primary school teachers were male. This figure dropped to 24.4 percent in 1992 and has continued to decline to 20.5 percent in 1998. The figures suggest that many children will not have a male teacher until their secondary school years.

The disproportionate number of men to women in a profession which is so central in the lives of children and families is very worrying both from an educational perspective for children’s learning and from a gender equity perspective. While kindergartens and childcare centres have focused on gender equity within their programmes, for example encouraging children to engage in a wide range of non-gender specific activities, the fact remains that the vast majority of the adults providing the programmes are of one gender.

Men are needed just as much as women in teaching, and especially during the first six to eight years when children are forming their gender identities, values, and attitudes. Children as young as two-year-olds know whether their teacher is male or female and while female teachers may purposefully model masculine behaviours and attitudes they are not actually men.

Overseas research has pointed to a range of benefits of having men on the teaching staff, including benefits for children’s learning and for improving the dynamics of staff relationships. As well there exists a substantial literature on the importance of men’s involvement in child rearing. In recent years, due in no small part to the work of the late Commissioner for Children Laurie O'Reilly, the importance of fathers and the need for men to participate in children’s lives has become a topical social issue.

As a first step to exploring ways of supporting male teachers, reducing unfair biases and tensions in centres, and recruiting men into the teaching profession, information is needed about male teachers and their experiences. Key questions are: Who are these men? Why are they in teaching? What differences might they bring to teaching because they are male? And what is it like to be a teacher who is male?

The Study

The aim of this study was to gain some preliminary insights into what male teachers are like and what it is like to be a male teacher. Twenty men working with children in kindergartens and childcare centres participated in the study.

They were selected through a process of approaching kindergarten associations and childcare centres at random to obtain five participants working in childcare in the North Island and five in the South Island, with the same number for the kindergarten service. Participants ranged in age from 24 to 54 years—the
average age was 35 years. Kindergarten participants tended to be middle-aged with nine out of 10 being in their thirties or forties, and childcare participants tended to be either younger in their twenties or older in their fifties (eight out of 10 men). They had an average of seven years experience working in early childhood education (range 6 months to 15 years). All participants held some kind of teaching qualification except for two childcare participants. One was not trained and the other had the final year of his field-based diploma to complete. Four participants held university degrees and a fifth had only a third of his degree to complete. Five out of the 20 participants were the head teacher or supervisor at their centre.

Each participant was interviewed at a place and time of his own choosing. Interviews were tape-recorded for later transcription. Participants were asked a series of questions relating to their background, views, and experiences using a semi-structured interview format. The interviews were analysed with the assistance of the Q.S.R. NUD.IST computer program. Participants’ responses were coded and categorised, and responses within and across categories were compared to identify common viewpoints and experiences and to note any differences.

About Male Teachers

Personal status

Data on the family and income status of the participants indicates that most were family men and that their earnings often formed the greatest contribution to the household income. Most participants (65 percent) were parents including one who was a single parent and at least two men who reported having responsibility for children not their own through marriage or re-marriage. Seventy-five percent of participants were the main or the sole household income earner. This finding suggests that the level of pay should be considered as an important factor in the recruitment of men into teaching. Moreover, given that many of the male teachers were parents, family-friendly workplace policies are important for them.

Self-perception

Participants’ own perceptions of themselves were generally different from the social belief that men must be feminine or gay to choose to work with young children. When asked how they would describe themselves the majority (70 percent) talked either about having a mixture of feminine and masculine characteristics or being individuals and not feeling that they could fit into either gender category. Twenty-five percent described themselves as masculine men but not as strong macho types. These participants talked about how working with children and women had enlightened and changed their views especially on the social and economic disadvantages women as a group experience within society. Only one participant described himself as effeminate, playing down his maleness, seeing issues in a female way, and preferring the company of women to men.

Reasons for Entering Teaching

Women have some influence over men’s decision to enter early childhood teaching. Twenty-five percent of men talked about how a female member of their family was instrumental during their childhood in helping them to value and like “women’s work”. For example, David explained that he was an only child and spent a lot of time with his mother who taught him much about women’s work. As adults, 35 percent of participants reported that they entered early childhood work almost by accident through the suggestion or example of their wife, girl friend, or a female friend. Desmond, for example, explained that after he was laid off from his job as a plumber and experienced difficulty in finding a new job his partner suggested that he do some relieving work at her childcare centre. At the time he did not like the idea because he viewed it as a woman’s job. However, he went along with his partner’s suggestion as he considered it was better than doing nothing. Four years later he is still in childcare, aspires to become a childcare supervisor, and has no desire to return to plumbing.

Desmond’s experience of entering the field as a second or later career choice was typical of many of the men in this study. Most participants (75 percent) were unemployed, made redundant from their job, or their business was closed prior to entering teaching. This finding indicates that becoming a teacher is probably
not something that men dream about or aspire to as teenagers, but rather something they go into after trying more traditional jobs.

Men can be encouraged to consider early childhood teaching as a possible career option through contact with a male teacher as was the case with 10 percent of participants in this study. For example, through chatting with a male teacher who came to his book-shop one participant decided to try teaching. One possible strategy to increase the participation rate of men in teaching would be to show men more often in advertisements about early childhood teaching. Another strategy would be for career advisers to ask male teachers to talk with groups of students and for recruitment agencies to call on male teachers to talk with unemployed and mature men who are seeking a career change. Most importantly, female early childhood teachers should not underestimate their influence through talking positively with men they know about early childhood teaching as a worthwhile and satisfying occupation.

Roles and Behaviours

Participants reported that they carried out the same work as their female colleagues, with the exception of 15 percent of participants who did not change children’s nappies or pants (because their employer would not allow them to in two cases and because in one case the teacher wanted to reduce the possibility himself of being accused of child sex abuse). Although as teachers they reportedly did much the same work as their female colleagues it seems that male teachers may extend our current notions of the role of the teacher. For instance, in regards to how much the teacher gets involved in play, how much latitude is given for play that is usually classed as boisterous or fun but not educational, discipline, relationships, and challenging social bias.

Participants perceived themselves as being very much hands on in participating with children in the children’s activities. They perceived the teacher’s role as helping children to have fun, to laugh, and to enjoy learning through their play. In other words, a key part of the teacher’s role was to be a playmate or friend. Participants valued active participation in both standard activities such as dough and block play as well as in children’s spontaneous social play including chasing games and rough and tumble play on the floor:

I do a lot of dancing with the children. I like to get involved with what the children are doing and will join them in building castles or tall buildings. … I notice I have a lot more to do with the children when they are doing physical activities like jumping. Very rarely do I see the other [female] staff members holding the children and picking them up and getting the children to jump off objects or jumping to me. The children who are on bikes and can’t reach the pedals, I will push them around. (Dirk)

It probably increases their [the children’s] involvement because I am in their play. I am part of their play until I get tired and think I might take a seat. Then the children all go and hide and so I go and hide too. (Warren)

While male teachers seem to provide children with a greater range and scope of physical play at the same time they find they sometimes have a different kind of influence on children’s behaviour compared with their female colleagues. The reasons given by participants for their tendency to sometimes be more effective in managing children’s negative behaviour included their deeper voice, their understanding of why children (often boys) were behaving badly, and that children may have already learnt that within society men tend to command more respect (or fear):

You should have been here at mat-time. The kids were performing rather badly [for the female teacher]. As soon as I walked in they were quiet. They know they can’t play up for me... the pitch of my voice is louder. … I can be heard more clearly. (Don)

I have observed that I have fewer problems with discipline and I think that’s probably a hangover from the wait ‘till your dad comes home, you'll be told off type of thing. I try
not to take on that disciplinary role but when I do speak to children they are more inclined to listen to me than the female teachers. (Dennis)

In addition Alan mentioned that children from some cultures responded to him as an authority figure because he was male.

For the participants an important part of their role as teachers was to establish rapport with the children, going beyond simple friendship to understanding where children were coming from and children’s viewpoints and feelings. It seems that their different gender and minority status may help male teachers to identify more with children as people rather than as students and makes them aware of the possible influence of their gender on children:

Children can feel they can be the kind of person they are at home, at kindergarten. With the women [teachers] it is you are a four-year-old and I am the teacher…. I’ll come in the morning and say to the kids, “Give me five! Good to see you!” (Alan)

I seem to have a really warm rapport with the children. If I start on a later shift and I walk in the door the kids are, like— “Richard's here!!!” (Richard)

We had one particular girl whose parents had split up and for the first three months after she started she would not go anywhere near me. All she saw when she saw a male was her father, and she was scared. As time went on we became very good friends, to the point that although she is at school now she still visits…. It was a good close bond and a positive one, which was important for her. (Grant)

Male teachers help by their presence and also through their activities and interactions to increase awareness of gender role stereotypes. For example, Noel reported that he noticed his kindergarten’s dramatic play area excluded boys and after bringing the attention of his colleagues to this most of the sexist materials were discarded and the remainder was spread throughout the kindergarten environment. Dirk reported that children have talked to him about being a boy and discussed his gender with him. Martin explained that it is important children observe him doing traditionally feminine activities such as cooking as well as more traditionally masculine activities such as drilling holes and putting hooks in. All participants reported that a male teacher was beneficial for increasing children’s awareness that men can be teachers and men can be caring; in Noel’s words:

Children see that men care for them as well. It shows that there are men who are prepared to spend time with them - that men care for children.

Their Personal and Professional Experiences

Acceptance

Only 25 percent of participants reported that immediate members of their family supported their decision to become teachers. It helped to have a wife or partner working in early childhood education, to have worked with children previously, or to have had difficulty finding work. Most participants (75 percent) spoke of family members who argued that they should not be teachers for any one or more of the following reasons: it is a woman’s profession, it has low status, they risk being accused sooner or later of child abuse, it was not real work, and they were capable of higher achievement. Similar reactions from friends and acquaintances were experienced by 50 percent of participants:

I used to go to parties and I used to be quite proud I was a kindergarten teacher. Now I just say I am a teacher. Not because I am not proud of it but because I can’t stand the criticism. (Don)

Male friends joked: “Oh, child molester.” They thought I was a girl. (Richard)
Most of the participants who had undergone training reported little difficulty on the basis of their gender in being accepted into their training course. The exceptions were three who applied for training before 1985 when it was virtually unknown for men to be in early childhood teaching. Anecdotal evidence was given by some participants of men they knew who were not (but they believed should have been) accepted into training around the time of the Civic Childcare Centre Peter Ellis sex abuse case 1992/3. The Ellis case seemed to have some influence on the decision of two participants in training at the time to enter kindergarten teaching instead of childcare work. Difficulties were experienced by participants during training, centred around the lack of male peers and male lecturers and the feminine orientation of course content and expectations. As Ivan explained:

... the training was very female oriented. I wouldn’t have got through it if I didn’t have another male doing it with me. It is very difficult to be a male in that environment.

Men face discrimination on the basis of their gender when applying for teaching positions. For example, when Desmond applied for a new position at a childcare centre he reported that the committee looked more closely into his background and did a police check on him because he was a man (this had not been done for women staff appointments). Len was put on a month’s trial when he started work in a childcare centre because the centre was unsure whether a man would be capable of doing the work. When Noel tried to change to a different kindergarten district he found after a year of trying that he could not even win a teacher’s position although he was currently a head teacher. His experience over the years in applying for positions in different kindergarten districts was that some districts did not want male teachers. Only one participant who worked in childcare reported that he had never had any problem in applying for jobs and his experience was one of almost reverse discrimination because centres he had applied to wanted a teacher who was male.

Fish out of Water

As men in a female profession male teachers are easily noticed and as Gary explained it is something they have to live with due to their small number. They can find it annoying to be singled out or treated differently simply because they are men and not women. Noel mentioned that at large area staff meetings other (female) staff tease him about being the only male. Denis noted that many people approach him first when they enter the kindergarten, assuming that he is the boss. When James started work at a kindergarten he was very aware that he was the only male at committee meetings and he felt everyone else was aware of this too. It took quite a while before he felt accepted into the group.

While participants accepted that conversation amongst teaching colleagues is often on female topics this can make male teachers feel uncomfortable, isolated, and even excluded as the following illustrates:

Being the only male in my centre can be lonely because any social conversation that goes on I don’t know if I necessarily fit into it At times a female staff member has turned to me and said, “Oh you wouldn’t understand, you’re a male.” (Dirk)

But equally annoying as feeling singled out or excluded can be an assumption that male teachers want to be accepted as women. Desmond and Glen disliked being regarded as honorary females and they believed their colleagues wanted to avoid dealing with the fact that teachers can be male.

Implications and Conclusion

Male teachers do not fit the macho traditional image of the masculine man and nor do they all fit the image of being girls or gays. It should be recognised that men have a right to care for children and that stereotypes can be harmful to their participation in teaching. There may be benefits for women in encouraging more men to enter early childhood teaching because, as some participants in this study said, working in early childhood can influence men’s views about gender roles and increase their understanding of women’s issues.
The level of salary or wage is probably an important consideration for attracting and retaining more male teachers into the field, given that many were the primary or main income earner in their household. Like women teachers, male teachers may also have family members to support. Careers advisers and recruitment personal in training institutions could consider targeting mature-aged men, providing them with information about early childhood teaching, and arranging opportunities for them to meet male teachers. Women working in early childhood education could play a proactive role in encouraging male family members and acquaintances to enter teaching since this was one of the main ways that participants in this study came to take up teaching.

There was no evidence that male teachers do not do the same work that female teachers do, however, in regards to interacting and relating with children there seems to be some differences. This may be due to how male teachers perceive their role, often as friends and playmates, and the effect of their gender on what they feel they add to the early childhood setting, for example a desire to understand the child’s viewpoint. Children notice the gender of their teachers and this in turn can mean that children respond differently to teachers of different gender, for example in the area of behaviour management. Male teachers clearly have a contribution to make in helping programmes to become more gender inclusive and allowing for a wider range of differences to exist. Further study of the differences male teachers bring to the programme because of their gender would be useful, including looking at children’s perspectives on their male and female teachers, and observation of teachers at work.

The social climate can influence whether men are accepted into training, but generally entry into training does not appear to be a barrier to male participation in teaching. Colleges of Education and teacher education/training establishments could note however that male students may experience a lack of support and find it difficult to fit in. Some simple strategies may help, such as ensuring male students are placed in the same class groups, addressing gender bias in course content (for example, in cases where there may be a focus on women’s issues but not men’s issues), and looking at how male students can have contact with male role models (for example, on teaching placement).

Socially it is often not easy for men who are early childhood teachers. Staff trainers, female colleagues, and employers could help by letting men know that they recognise they are going against social norms. They could also support male teachers by acknowledging and valuing their perspectives and interests, without making them feel singled out like freaks or turning them into honorary females. Employment policies should take into account the minority status of men in the teaching profession and ensure that men do not experience any disadvantage during the appointments process. Moreover, employers should seek a gender balance in the staff of early childhood centres and not have none or only a token male staff employee.

The findings of this study suggest that male teachers tend to have a fairly hard time because it is so unusual for men in our society to be involved in early childhood education and care. We need to become more open to male participation in early childhood teaching and to more actively work to support and increase the participation rate of men in this important occupation.

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