

Of Puppy Dog Tails, Sugar and Spice: Gender Inequality and Discrimination in Early Childhood Education

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ABSTRACT¹: This paper looks at how equal the opportunities for men in early childhood teaching are. Men are scarce in the profession. Early childhood teaching is a women's occupation. Given that men are under-represented and that the profession is dominated by women, could it be that men experience discrimination? The findings reported here suggest that they do. The subjective experiences and perspectives of male childcare and kindergarten teachers and their female colleagues tell a story of apathy towards encouraging male participation in teaching, sexist treatment, and discriminatory employment practices.

INTRODUCTION

The early childhood education sector represents one of the most sex-segregated work forces in New Zealand. While most other traditionally male and female occupations are now characterised by a more equitable gender balance early childhood teaching remains almost exclusively a female domain. That early childhood teaching is a women's occupation is a key explanation for the low wages and status of the profession. The lack of male representation also affects the ability of teachers to provide quality early childhood education since children need positive male as well as female role models.

The involvement of men as well as women in early childhood education is vital from a social learning theory perspective. During the early childhood years positive male role models can have an impact on children's conceptions of gender appropriate behaviour. For example, Gold and Reis (1982) argue that boys are more likely to admire and copy academically oriented, and other positive behaviour such as caring, from male teachers whereas the female teachers' model does not usually have the same motivational effect. By the time children reach primary school age they can reject male teachers, regarding them as "odd" or not real men because they do not reflect the sex-role stereotypes they have come to understand (Goodman & Kelly, 1988).

A Swedish study by Carlquist (1990 translated and summarised in Jensen, 1996, p.18) indicates that when an equal number of men and women are employed in an early childhood centre girls are affected most, particularly in their choice of more masculine-type activities. Both boys and girls engaged more in activities involving construction and movement, confirming that men influence children towards spatial accomplishments. More dialogue between the children and teachers was observed, and children had more contact and dialogue with the male teachers than with the female teachers. In short, male teachers positively add to the quality of children's experiences and enrich their possibilities for learning.

It is generally not acknowledged by early childhood professionals and teacher educators that a non-sexist learning environment for children can not be attained without having both male and female teachers represented in the early childhood centre (for example see the Department of Education, 1989, guide on countering sexism). Meade (1992) in a speech at a Teachers' Refresher Course said that she was not optimistic

¹ **Summary of Author's Recommendations from the Research:** To achieve a more equitable balance of male and female teachers in early childhood centres two major suggestions arise from the findings. First, specific projects to recruit men both into training programmes and into employment are needed, as are a set of guidelines for employers on the appointment of men and gender-equity in the workplace. Second, there needs to be recognition that the child abuse argument is being used to keep men out of teaching and to limit their involvements with children. Positive action for change should be taken by all groups and organisations associated with early childhood education (including the Ministry of Education and the New Zealand Educational Institute). A focus on increasing the involvement of men in caring for and educating young children is needed.

about the ability of women teachers to foster girls’ maths and science learning and provide a non-sexist curriculum. Meade did not identify that part of the problem of teachers’ inability could be that teachers are women, and that traditionally maths and science have not been strong areas of female achievement at school.

Removing sex-role stereotyping in the early childhood centre is probably impossible without the representation of male as well as female role models for children. For example, Holmes (1996) points out that until children see male and female teachers working cooperatively together they will continue to use gender as a criterion for selecting play partners and segregate themselves into ‘boys’ and ‘girls’ play areas. Clyde (1995) argues that children need to see their teachers practise what they expect of them in regards to non-sexist and inclusive behaviour.

Table One below shows the proportion of men to women in early childhood and compulsory education groups. The statistics suggest that the older the child the more likely men are to participate in the child’s education. Yet, as mentioned earlier in this paper, it can be argued that a balance of male and female teachers is probably more important in the early childhood years than in the later years of education.

Table 1. Teachers (full time equivalent) by Gender at State Schools and Licensed Kindergartens and Childcare Centres

Education Level	Male	Female
Kindergarten and Childcare Centres	1.3%	98.7%
Primary	22.3%	77.7%
Composite Area	38.9%	61.1%
Secondary	49.1%	50.9%

* Statistics collected by the Ministry of Education for schools and early childhood services in 1995.

Dunn, Pole and Rouse (1992) carried out a comprehensive census of the education workforce to provide a data base for the Ministry of Education’s equal employment opportunity (EEO) policies. They reported that kindergarten employee’s salaries were significantly lower than the average for all other compulsory and post-compulsory teacher groups (approximately 13% less), and that opportunities for promotion were very limited. They concluded that the pay and promotion disadvantage of kindergarten teachers relative to teachers in other education sectors impacted almost entirely on women as women made up 99 percent of the kindergarten work force.

The Ministry of Education’s perspective is that an equal employment opportunities programme in an education service must support legislation in targeting four groups: women, people with disabilities, Maori, and Pacific Islanders and other ethnic minorities. Men are not identified as a key target group, although it is stated by the Ministry of Education (1992) that the management of individual services *may* decide to include men in their EEO policy. Thus, at the official level the lack of male representation in early childhood education does not appear to be considered a problem necessitating specific policy initiatives or directives to training providers and employers. Male under-representation in early childhood work is further strengthened by the macho stereotype of the “kiwi bloke”, along with social acceptance of women moving into every traditional male occupation but not of men moving into all areas of traditional women’s work (Phillips, 1987; The Economist, 1996).

The Human Rights Act (1993) encompasses any group or individual that experiences discrimination or unfair treatment and EEO programmes must therefore take the Human Rights Act into account. To date there is little documented evidence to suggest that the single-gender nature of the early childhood work force may be supported by sexist attitudes and discriminatory employment practices. The dearth of men in early childhood education may simply be due to men’s lack of interest and their upbringing as males.

This paper presents findings relating to the question of whether men experience discrimination and how equal the opportunities for men are in early childhood education. The data presented here have been drawn from a larger study (Farquhar, 1997) on the subjective perspectives of 40 male and female kindergarten and childcare teachers, and male teachers’ experiences.

METHOD

The sample comprised of 40 teachers (20 men and 20 women) from 10 kindergartens and 10 childcare centres in the North and South Islands of New Zealand. Due to the small number of male teachers scattered throughout New Zealand and therefore the difficulty of carrying out random sampling, networking and the 'snowball' technique were used to obtain the male childcare sample, and regional kindergarten associations were asked for the names of male kindergarten teachers. A female colleague of each of the 20 male teachers was included in the sample.

Focused in-depth interviews were carried out with individual participants. The interviews were tape-recorded, transcribed and prepared into document files for analysis using Q.S.R. NUD*IST 3.0, a computer programme for qualitative data analysis. In reporting the findings teachers' names have been changed to protect their identity. Direct quotes are included to support and illustrate the findings as appropriate.

Slightly more female ($n = 7, 35\%$) than male teachers ($n = 5, 25\%$) were the teacher-in-charge at their early childhood centre (i.e. childcare supervisor or kindergarten head teacher). Male teachers had an average of 7 years teaching experience (range 6 months to 15 years) and female teachers an average of 11.1 years experience (range 1 to 35 years). The average male age of 35 years was a little lower than the average female age of 37.7 years. Eighteen male and 19 female teachers held some form of teaching or childcare qualification. Data on salary/wages was collected but no significant difference in the actual amount received between male and female teachers was found. Taking into account that slightly more women than men held positions of responsibility and had more years of experience there is a slight possibility that men may have been advantaged in their salary/wages because the remuneration level for both groups was similar.

FINDINGS

Bias, Job Protection and Apathy

When asked for their point of view as to whether men are discriminated against in employment and promotion most teachers stated that men are discriminated against ($n = 27, 67.5\%$), either absolutely ($n = 15, 37.5\%$) or in certain situations such as which employer and which geographical area they applied for work in ($n = 12, 30\%$).

There is discrimination against men in some areas of New Zealand. It took me 18 months in the Manawatu to get a permanent position whereas when I applied for a position in Wellington I got the first job I applied for. In the Hawkes Bay I applied for 12 jobs as a *teacher* in one year and got turned down for every one (even though Noel was an experienced head teacher).

This centre has quite a good reputation for employing males. I've heard of other centres who flatly refuse to employ males, although it's not a written policy it is an underlying policy (Martin).

I had been trying to get into childcare for a couple of years and for all five jobs I was actually interviewed for I never got the job. I actually rang one of the people back and they said that the two people they thought were good for the job were myself and a woman supervisor, and they weighed us both up and because we both had similar qualifications, similar experience, etc, they gave the job to a woman (Don).

I remember being at a union meeting in my first year of teaching where it was suggested that it be put to the vote that men couldn't move up into management positions in early childhood because women should be taking those positions as it is a women's profession (Elle).

The early childhood profession in general does not welcome men's involvement according to just over half the teachers ($n = 21, 52.5\%$). Their comments indicated that men are placed or are made to feel on the outside of the profession because they are a very small minority group.

A lot of women see it as a female domain. Because of their orientation and beliefs in bringing children up they see little use for men apart from fertilising eggs basically...It's like a coloured person walking into an all-white club. You are going to be discriminated against because women, if they have their own personal agenda, will work together to exclude men (Glen).

It is a strong women profession. Often when they are standing up for more pay it is like we are the women in this area and we are underpaid because we are women. I suppose there is a feeling of unity (Ruth).

I have found that women are just as protective of their profession as men are in their professions. I went to an early childhood union conference when they came so close to voting that a man on the national executive should only be there on a pro rata of members of the union. So if there were four men on the national executive, two would have to go. One man stormed out of the conference crying. I comforted him, none of the women did (Len).

I have talked to female staff who have gone along on a supervisor's course. They said to me that people said that it is a women's profession and that basically men should not be involved in it. I didn't think that this is something that would be said (Dirk).

Many teachers stated that male under-representation in the profession was due to lack of recognition that it was an issue, and that early childhood groups and organisations did not see that anything needed to be done about it (n = 21, 52.5%). Since early childhood care and education has traditionally been the domain of women, the profession which is female dominated has not been interested in changing the status quo.

I think mainly it has always been a women's profession so therefore more women are willing to accept the lower pay jobs. Women still accept lower paid jobs - we are our own worst enemies (Alice)

The profession will just meander along the way it is - always a female profession because no one with sufficient authority wants to do anything about it. In most professions women are discriminated against and early childhood is one of the few that they actually dominate and I think they would like to quietly keep it that way. They make no effort to let you fit in. You are a fish out of water! (Ivan)

At one of the meetings we had with the Ministry of Education somebody came to talk to us. When I brought up that men are the minority in this industry and that surely we should be written into the policy they said, "No you can't do that! EEO policy must be for these people - disabilities, women, Pacific Islanders and Maoris, and not men". Yet women are the majority...within the administration as well. The parents who run the kindergartens are mainly women. I can see the point of view of EEO - it works out there but doesn't work in early childhood education (Don).

Working Conditions

Key reasons for the lack of male teachers in relation to conditions of employment were considered to be wages (n= 37, 92.5%), the status or prestige of early childhood work (n = 34, 85%), followed by the career structure (n = 28, 70%).

Early childhood work was described by teachers as providing a good second income. Teachers said that men are more likely than women to be the main income earner in their household and that providing for a family would be very difficult on an early childhood teacher's wages. Men who are used to being high wage earners would be unlikely to consider early childhood teaching as a career. Further, men are financially disadvantaged because in low paying male occupations they could still be earning more than in teaching.

I used to be a plumber and earned more for laying drains than I do for looking after people's children. There were men in plumbing who had no qualifications what so ever. I have spent three years training and I'm getting less than what I was as a plumber (Desmond).

I'm returning to College to train for primary teaching. When I was single my salary was enough but now that I am supporting a wife and two children I find that it is not as great a salary. Another reason why I am leaving is that I can't seem to go any further. I'm a head teacher. I worked on contract at the College of Education to see if that would be another option, but I wasn't accepted as much as the other women there (Ivan).

As referred to by Ivan in the quote above the lack of career structure was considered to be a major disincentive to men's participation in early childhood teaching. Early childhood teachers now undertake a similar length of training as primary teachers but they have few opportunities for advancement. Kindergarten teachers mentioned that there were very few senior teacher positions available throughout the country. As a women's profession early childhood teaching has low social status and financial value:

It's not very prestigious to sweep floors and wipe tables down and that sort of thing. I think we are still seen to be a mother figure really. To be here to provide children with lots of cuddles and that sort of thing (Tania).

Male friends of mine who are in other occupations like computers, their occupations are considered more prestigious (Dirk).

Harassment

Seventy percent of the male teachers (14 out of 20) had experienced sexism which made them feel inferior, embarrassed, or that they were being unfairly treated. For example Dirk reported that he had often been purposefully excluded by female colleagues from social conversations "at times a female staff member has turned to me and said 'Oh you wouldn't understand you're a male'". Ivan's story below of his experience at an area kindergarten association staff meeting suggests just how out of place it is possible to feel as a male in an all-female environment:

We had a woman come in as guest speaker, I think it was from rape crisis. We had a few lesbian teachers in the Association and it turned into an anti-male meeting. They were going to castrate all rapists and blah blah blah...The window was open behind me. I was seriously thinking of getting out of it. A couple of women apologised to me afterwards because they realised they had got a bit carried away (Ivan).

Men stated that they felt it was unfair how they were often singled out for attention.

When I go to meetings I am the only man in the meeting. I often get singled out. They often say, 'good afternoon ladies...and "oh" gentlemen'. I find that quite disturbing, that I may be being treated differently because I am a male. I don't want the others to feel that I am getting special attention and I don't want special attention anyway (Don).

Seven men mentioned sexist joking and being "hooked" or "teased" as something which as Doug said "in a reverse situation some women would see it as harassment". Desmond and Glen believed their female colleague's perception and treatment of them as "honorary females" to be unfair. As Glen explained:

I have to get used to being in a female environment and they should get used to a male being in their environment. They shouldn't make anyone an honorary anything.

The men seemed to accept low-level harassment and sexism as part of their job. For example Gary said "you are one of the staff, and you are a man, and you can't avoid those things". Alan explained that he accepts that because he is in the minority as a male he will experience sexist comments and humorous jokes that are derogatory about men. He did not want colleagues "to be politically correct all the time".

Recruitment and Training

According to both male and female teachers in this study, men are not specifically recruited for early childhood teaching. It tends not, for example, to be promoted as a career option for boys at secondary or high school.

The high schools don't encourage young men to come here for work experience. I can't believe that out of the two big high schools here that there wouldn't be one boy who would be interested (May).

The publicity and information brochures of different teacher training providers rarely show pictures of men working in early childhood settings and do not include statements specifically welcoming applications from men. Yet as Kim said, "it could be changed because something was done to recruit more Pacific Island and Maori" people into the profession. Fifteen teachers (n = 37.5%) discussed problems associated with men being accepted into training courses and their experiences during training. Four male teachers reported difficulty in gaining entry to training and one female teacher reported that a man she knew who would have been a good teacher had applied for training but was not accepted. According to the teachers the female-oriented nature of training within a female dominated environment posed difficulties for men. For example:

I know there were times when Desmond felt uncomfortable about his NZCA training. There were things like group hugs and talking about women problems and they never tackled the men's side of it. There were days when he would come back from his training and say that he felt uncomfortable about something that had happened (Irene talking about her male colleague's childcare training experience).

I started Teacher's College with three men in our course and none passed, only one went back. Men come across a lot of obstacles during their training - when I think of some of the courses we had to do like "Women's Issues". The male in our class got a hard time and that's not right. They are taught by mainly female lecturers who are comfortable and used to dealing with women. The teaching is aimed at women (Joan).

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 all-female environment (Ivan).

Labelling and Discrimination on the Basis of Sex

Early childhood teaching is not regarded in society to be a suitable and wise occupation for men. There exists a belief that real men do not care for children and boys are brought up to regard working with young children as women's work.

My parents had very stereotypical views. It was not something that you were told about at school as a career choice ... My experience of the other guys I've met who are in early childhood is that they didn't specifically go into the area. They did other things first after leaving school ... Whereas for most women it was raised at school that early childhood was a path they could follow (Desmond).

I feel that there's possibly a lot of men out there who would really like to be in early childhood but because of pressure from other men they feel they can't (Hayley).

My father had never heard of men working in that profession before and thought I'd thrown away my education. He told me what a fool I was (Ivan).

In practice, most teachers felt that men should not be assumed to be less competent than women in caring for children. For example, Roxanne explained:

I've had to learn that men are just as good, they just look at things differently and they do things differently from women. Because it is largely women who run the show they (other women) don't see that what men do is always right.

Only three (female) teachers believed that women are naturally more competent. For example, Mary said that women have the instinct for knowing if there is something wrong with a child and women are also more capable in housekeeping tasks such as "doing nice corners on the cots" when changing sheets.

Men who go against the powerful social belief that men should not work with young children and show that in practice they can be as competent as women then face being labelled as 'girls', 'queers' or homosexuals. The social perception that men in childcare can not be real men and therefore must be feminine or gay is a significant barrier according to the majority of teachers in this study (n = 27,67.5%). Single men without children are more likely to be regarded as being gay/homosexual. Men who are married and have children of their own seem to find that they are accepted more than single men, as Doug explained:

Being a person who has always been in a relationship, or in an active heterosexual relationship right the way through and having children of my own has helped people find out fairly soon and to realise "oh well he can't be gay".

Such labelling of male teachers on the basis of sexuality can be described as prejudice. The men in this study either regarded such prejudiced attitudes as (1) the problem of the person(s) holding the stereotyped view and they set out to prove that real men can work effectively with young children, or, (2) they viewed their sexuality as separate to their work and ignored such attitudes.

They pick on you like: "Len doesn't like doing the dishes". It's not true. I then have to prove that I do the dishes. They (female teachers) can get away with not doing the dishes (Len).

It feels to me that I have to try really hard to prove something as a male. In some ways I feel that I've got to work harder than a woman (James).

In 1991 a family came into the kindergarten. Towards the end of the morning the child's mother came up to me and asked if she could have a word with me. She wanted to go somewhere private so we went to the kitchen. She was asking questions on behalf of her husband. They wanted to know if I was a practising homosexual, and I turned around and asked how this was relevant to the job that I was doing which could not be answered. Needless to say their child did not come to the kindergarten while I was there, but as soon as I went on a year's leave to relieve at another kindergarten the child started kindergarten which I found fascinating (Noel).

The Sexual Abuse Argument and Problem

There exists a belief, at least amongst some employers, that employing men means an increased risk of child sexual abuse. Approximately half of the teachers (55%, n = 22) stated that employers are biased towards female job applicants because they believe men are likely to sexually abuse children and they do not want to take this risk. For example, at Irene's childcare centre, when they were looking to employ a long-term reliever the best applicant for a position was a male, but because they already employed one male teacher a committee member refused to permit the employment of a second male because she did not like the idea that "two males could end up in the bathroom with children". Glen commented that employers are suspicious of the motives of men, believing that only men who want easy access to abuse children would enter early childhood teaching given the low pay, lack of career structure, and low status of the work.

The sexual abuse argument seems to have prompted restrictions on men's caregiving in some centres as well as male teachers practicing defensive caregiving for their own protection. Two men, Glen and Ethan, were not permitted by their employers to change children's nappies, pants or clothes. They were happy about this requirement, viewing it as a safeguard against possible accusation of abuse, rather than as a restriction which could be seen as discriminatory. Female teachers often just assumed their male colleague's responsibility for toileting and nappy changing, as Ivan discussed:

Even for boys I am not doing as much changing as I used to do. It's something that the female teachers often just volunteer to do the changing. I think they realise the situation

The majority of male teachers (70%, n = 14) personally feared being accused of child molestation. Many had actually been accused or had felt that they were under suspicion (55%, n = 11). For example, one Wellington childcare teacher was physically assaulted in his own home by a male stranger simply because he was a man working with young children. All teachers (n = 40) agreed that fear of being accused of child abuse was a leading reason for the under-representation of men in early childhood teaching.

The child abuse issue affected the quality of men's interactions with children and the tasks they performed. Hayley, for example, explained that she knew her male colleague Doug

...feels difficult about cuddling a child, which is really sad. He still does cuddle them but he's very aware of what the outcome could be - whereas I'll just pick up a kid without worrying.

Kim reported that her male colleague Martin preferred to be in group rather than individual situations with children because "it is safer to be in open space and do the obvious things". Martin said that when he changed children's nappies in the bathroom he always did this quickly and returned to the playroom to reduce the possibility that other adults might think he was up to no good. Grant spoke about the difficulty of forming close relationships with children. A girl at his centre had told her mother that she loved him and the mother reacted negatively to this because she was worried that Grant might be having sexual contact with her daughter.

DISCUSSION

It seems ironic that childcare centres developed to enable women with young children to enter the labour market and obtain equal employment opportunities; yet early childhood teaching is itself very gender-segregated. The evidence presented here from interviews with practising male and female teachers clearly indicates that men's participation in early childhood teaching is not actively encouraged or well supported. In Ivan's words, men are like "fish out water" in the field. Male teachers experience various forms and degrees of discrimination because of their sex.

The male teachers seem to accept low-level harassment and sexism in their work place because they regard it as being part and parcel of working in a female-dominated environment. However, in terms of the *Human Rights Act* (1993) it seems that public administrators, early childhood organisations and training providers need to take responsibility for and action against this sexism. Prohibited grounds of discrimination according to the *Human Rights Act* include sex, marital status, and sexual orientation. Early childhood teaching is not listed as one of the exceptions under the Act, therefore it follows that by law men should have equal opportunities with women and a right not to be treated differently on the basis of their sex, sexuality, or marital status.

Perhaps the greatest barrier to men's employment according to this study's findings is the sex abuse argument. In Britain the situation is similar where debate on male involvement in early childhood work has focussed on the risk of child abuse (Skelton, 1994). In contrast Nordic countries have focussed on the issue of how to increase the number of men working with young children because it is considered that children need both male and female teachers (Jensen, 1996).

The child abuse issue appears to have had a negative impact on the work male teachers carry out, and particularly on their relationships and interactions with children. Some male teachers had restrictions placed on them because of their gender, and this could be regarded as discrimination. A recent British male teacher's successful claim to an industrial tribunal of sex discrimination suggests that male teachers in New Zealand could have valid grounds of complaint (Hancock, 1996). The British teacher argued it was unfair that he was not allowed to take children to the toilet as only female staff were permitted to do this.

Other significant barriers to male participation in early childhood teaching are wages, status, and the career structure. One solution would be for early childhood teachers with the same length of training as primary school teachers to be paid at least a similar level. However, with the May 1997 State Sector Amendment Bill

removing kindergartens from the State Sector the possibility of early childhood teachers ever achieving wage parity with primary or secondary school teachers is probably remote. Large-scale promotion of early childhood teaching as a suitable and important career option for men would be one possibility for challenging the feminine image of the work, and thus help to raise the status and in the long-term the wage level (Farquhar, 1995).

To achieve a more equitable balance of male and female teachers in early childhood centres two major suggestions arise from this study's findings. First, specific projects to recruit men both into training programmes and into employment are needed, as are a set of guidelines for employers on the appointment of men and gender-equity in the workplace. Second, there needs to be recognition and positive action by all groups and organisations associated with early childhood education (including the Ministry of Education and the New Zealand Educational Institute) that the child abuse argument is being used to keep men out and to limit men's involvement with children. Instead the focus should be on increasing the involvement of men in caring for and educating young children.

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