



## **Including Men in Early Childhood Education: Insights from the European Experience**

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### **Abstract**

*The European Commission Network on Childcare introduced gender as an issue in early childhood services in Europe. In 1996 the Network set a target of 20% male workers in childcare that had to be reached by 2006. Several campaigns and interesting initiatives were set up and were successful in Denmark, Norway, Sweden, the UK and Belgium, but no European country has reached the target. This has led us to investigate the reasons why early childcare and education is so gendered. Childcare is seen as women's work, something that women naturally do and are intrinsically better at. In addition, as gendered work assumes a female workforce, it is constantly reproducing its own patterns in recruitment and training. Several authors advocate on the one hand a gender-neutral culture that does not exclude men, and on the other hand they plead for gender pedagogy, a reflection on the differences between boys and girls, men and women. This paper examines the crucial question of what can be done to increase the employment of men. It discusses possible policy measures, men-only training courses, male mentorship of trainees, recruitment procedures that give equal opportunities to men, ways of remodelling the sector and of creating a men-friendly climate to make men visible in services.*

### **The Influence of the European Union: A Brief History**

To understand the attention that has been paid to the mixed-gender workforce in several European countries, we must go back to the mid eighties. The European Union started the first Gender Equality programme in order to give women equal opportunities on the labour market. Inside this EU Gender Equality Program, the European Commission set up a Network on Childcare and other measures to reconcile Employment and Family

Responsibilities in 1986. The president of this European Commission Childcare Network was Prof. Peter Moss from London University.

The Council of Ministers of the European Community (1992) made recommendations on childcare, in which “member States committed themselves to promote and encourage, with due respect for freedom of the individual, increased participation by men” (article 6).

The European Childcare Network undertook a wide examination of three areas: services for young children, leave for parents, and men as carers. In 1993 the Childcare Network invited experts from all over Europe to Ravenna to discuss the issue of men as carers. The experts agreed that measures to involve fathers more in the care of young children would have little effect if no male childcare workers were employed in day-care centres. As childcare professionals, men could serve as role models for young fathers and, at the same time, early childhood centres could play an important role as places where a new culture of childcare could be created: a culture in which there is also a place for men. Another significant argument for men in early childhood services is that children would be confronted with male role models and that this could have an effect on future generations, who would be more likely to share the household tasks and the care of the children proportionally.

The experts had to admit that there were only a few centres throughout Europe in which men made up a significant portion of the workforce. In most European countries, of all workers in early childhood services between 1% and 3% were men. The Network decided that the best approach would be to increase drastically the number of men in the childcare sector.

Several initiatives and campaigns targeting men for jobs in childcare were developed in mostly Nordic countries. Denmark was quite successful at the beginning of the nineties and reached 5% of male staff in the 0 to 3 yrs children’s centres, 9% in the centres for 3 to 6 years and the age-integrated centres and 25% in the out-of-school centres. The Sheffield Children’s Centre has worked with just as many men as women since the end of the eighties (Meleady & Broadhead, 2002) and Pen Green Centre, a family centre, also has several men among the staff. Childcare workers of those two centres, researchers and policy makers of Emilia Romagna, Norway, Sweden and Denmark formed a pioneer group that worked closely together with the Childcare Network (Jensen, 1998).

In the meantime, the EU Network had published the discussion document ‘Quality in services for young children’, which was translated in all languages of the European Union and which was discussed on a national level by childcare workers, policy makers and researchers in the member States of the EU. The role of men in services for young children was one of the topics of this discussion paper. In 1995 the Childcare Network of the European Commission published a report of this broad European discussion on quality: ‘Forty Quality Targets in services for young children’. Target 29 of this document says that 20% of the staff in childcare should be men. The targets should be realised before the end of the year 2006.

The activities of the European Commission Childcare Network stopped in 1996, but undoubtedly they have put the gender issue in early childcare and education on the political agenda in several European countries. The European Social Fund, a large European employment programme, funded several projects in different member States to attract men for jobs in childcare and early childhood education. The project 'Men into Childcare' (Mannen voor Kinderopvang), which ran from 2001 until 2003 in my home country Belgium is an example of such a program funded by the European Social Fund. However, there were also nationally funded actions and campaigns by Equal Opportunity Councils in different countries.

In spite of the focus on the gender issue, the target of 20% men has not been reached in any of the EU member States. In Denmark, the member State that had the highest number of men working in childcare in the nineties, the number of male workers for children under three years of age, actually dropped from 5% to 3%.

In the last couple of years other reasons to make care work less gendered have come about (European Commission, 2006). European societies are aging, and they will have to provide a solution to the crisis of care. The demand for care workers will increase, while the supply of women who want to do these kinds of jobs will reduce (Coomans, 2002). European member States and international organisations see the involvement of men in care professions as a way of resolving labour shortages (Equal Opportunity Commission, 2003). For the same reason, an international organisation like the OECD is advocating a mixed-gender workforce (OECD, 2006).

### **Why So Many Women and So Few Men involved in Early Child Care and Education**

Women are not only overrepresented in the early childhood workforce - in primary schools in the Netherlands 85% of the teachers are women; in the UK it is 86 % and in Denmark 76%. According to Moss (2003) gendering is related to the children's age: the younger the child, the higher the gendering.

Women pursue male careers because they offer prestige, higher pay and opportunities for advancement, but men in non-traditional occupations have less to gain and much to lose. They may have to make sacrifices in terms of pay and status, as well as raising questions on masculinity and suitability for the job (Simpson, 2005).

Pay and working conditions play an important role - but they are not the major reason. In several countries with a high level of professionalism, like New Zealand, Denmark and Sweden, the workforce is still highly gendered (Farquhar, 2006; Cameron, 2006). Thus, a high level of professionalism does not automatically lead to a mixed-gender workforce.

Historically the main reason for this female workforce in early childcare and education is that it is seen as 'women's work'. (Cameron, et al., 1999; Cameron, 2001). Another supplementary reason is that gendered work assumes a female workforce and therefore constantly reproduces its own patterns in recruitment and training.

Gender is unconsciously also embedded in the provisions for young children. Gender and sex are closely linked, in so far as one's biological sex will determine which gender role (male or female) society will expect one to play (Dejonckheere, 2001). Childcare, be it professional or volunteer work, is seen as women's work, something that women naturally do and are intrinsically better at.

This gender mechanism operates on two levels. At the individual level, the childcare employees or early childhood teachers pass on their specific cultural constructions of the role, that is, the tasks and behaviour of men and women within the specific context of their work in childcare. This happens through their gender identity. However, the gender component also plays a role at the institutional level: "it has had an impact on the historical and pedagogical understandings of why childcare exists, how it is conducted and organized, and what is gender appropriate have evolved through practice and policy over time" (Cameron, et al., 1999, p. 8). Early childhood care and education in Europe - is, in fact, based on a particular concept of care: 'mothercare'. This is, according to Cameron, Moss and Owen (1999), the primary reason for the extremely limited number of men in early childhood education and also for the low involvement of fathers in early childhood provisions (Demuyne & Peeters, 2006).

Reverting to the maternal role in early childcare and education has created a dilemma for men. Men do not feel like pitting themselves against the woman-mother version of care in early childhood education and care. For them, this is not an acceptable source of inspiration. However, to add to their predicament, there is also no 'father figure' as a role model, because the role of fathers in the education of young children is not yet valued by society. Many of the studies or initiatives on this subject are based on the - predictable - dysfunction of the father. In this vein, in the Anglo-Saxon world, groups (Dads and Lads) have been formed to involve fathers who have lost contact with their children or to prevent abuse (Tonkens, 2001). Thus, the role of the father is -until further notice - not a positive and inspiring example for men working in early childhood services and the maternal model is not useable for men, because it does not mesh with their male identity. Therefore, we need to rethink working with children and separate it from substitute mothering (Cameron, Moss, Owen, 1999).

### **Creating a Gender-neutral Culture**

The concept of 'gender identity' is constructed on the basis of differences. It is based on the labelling of the other as different and, therefore, uses the exclusion principle: a man is different from a woman (EC Childcare Network, 1993).

In order to avoid exclusion of men, childcare organisations should resolutely strive towards a 'multiplicity of gendered identities' (Cameron, Moss and Owen, 1999). Vandebroek (2001) translates this as 'multiple identity': we should not accept early childcare and education services that are based on one single identity - be it gender, culture or ethnicity. There are various visions, various ways of working that are used by various people and all of these have emotional, cultural, ethical and historical foundations and can, therefore, all be contested. Each separate identity must continually be called into question and be made visible through dialogue and debate. This

philosophy can be found in the Reggio Emilia approach, but also in other parts of Europe, such as in the Sheffield Children's Centre where diversity is the norm, not the exception (Meleady & Broadhead, 2002).

Ghedini (in EC Childcare Network, 1993) describes how a gender-neutral policy was created in the Pen Green Centre, which has an equal number of male and female employees. Illustrations are screened to make sure that they are 'male-friendly' and interactions with parents were recorded on video and examined to see if the staff had as much contact with the fathers as with the mothers. It should be kept in mind that male co-workers are not only role models for the fathers who bring their children to the centre - they can also make the centre itself more 'father-friendly.'

Most early childhood services however, still have a mother-centred approach. Last year, in Belgium we developed an instrument for services to measure the involvement of fathers in the activities that are organised for parents (Demuyne & Peeters, 2006). The use of this instrument showed that most of the activities organised for 'parents' were embedded in a 'female' culture and therefore mothers attended these 90% of the time. The services in our study are now focusing on the few activities that also attracted fathers in order to create a more gender-neutral culture in their centres

### **Arguments for a Gender Pedagogy**

Jensen (1998) pleads for a gender pedagogy and not a gender-neutral culture

The fact that boys and girls are different in some ways and choose different games and activities, give different challenges to those employed; both female and male. The daily pedagogic work must take these differences into account. This can be more easily fulfilled by a mixed-gender workforce. That will contain a greater diversity of masculine and feminine traits. (p. 122)

Recent research has focused on the difference between male and female teachers or pedagogues towards the behaviour of 'unruly boys' (Tavecchio, 2003). When watching unruly play of boys, male teachers or pedagogues can distinguish better between playing and aggression than their female colleagues. Female educators tend to see the unruly play more as aggression, while their male colleagues are more tolerant towards typical boyish behaviour. The ideal child for a female teacher is mostly a girl, and masculinity in boys is too often seen as negative (Tavecchio, 2003).

Early childhood carers and teachers can no longer ignore the masculinity of doing things. As men have other ways than women, it will be necessary to discuss routines, rituals, regulations and so on within early childhood services (Jensen, 1998). However, the ambivalence about what a masculine role model should be is difficult for men, because they are usually the only man in a staff composed solely of women. Female staff can see the one man as representing 'men' as a category, and they can expect him simultaneously to represent and challenge traditional masculinity (Owen, 2003). Cameron (2006) has warned against internalised gendered expectations as a

consequence of the limited number of men working in the sector. Men can be expected/forced into providing stereotyped role models: playing football, fixing electricity. To avoid this gender stereotyping, Cameron (2006) calls for more critical reflection in early childhood services on men's roles and experiences. Cameron, Moss and Owen (1999) point out that a solution lies in ensuring the visibility of men and women, both as categories and in their infinite variety.

### **Policy Challenges and Remedies**

Because gender is a social construct, it is strongly susceptible to change; the differences between men and women will vary according to place, culture, ethnicity and class. Yet, a gender segregated profession, like early child care and teaching, is unlikely to become mixed-gender by itself. There is no example of a country in which more men got into the profession without any concrete policy actions.

Moss (2003) states that 'a quick fix' can not work and advocates for sustained policy commitment and priority for a period of at least ten years (Moss, 2003). Explicit references in government policy documents on the need to recruit men into the sector provide an important motivation for officials to support change.

All relevant organisations and institutions have to be involved in the actions to change the gender balance (Jensen, 1998). To bring about change, initiatives at all levels are important: on the policy level, media campaigns, and actions towards employers, employment organisations, training institutions, parents and female workers. In the nineties, the Danish government was the first to put the gender issue in the early childhood sector on the political agenda. The British government launched a national Childcare Recruitment Campaign in 2000, which targeted men as well as underrepresented groups and fixed targets of 6% male workers by 2004. Yet, until now the target of 6% has not been achieved. The Norwegian government was successful in the effort to increase the number of men in Early Childhood Education. Nevertheless the 20% target for men in the childcare sector will not be reached (Johanssen, 2007). At the end of 2006 Norway had 9% of men in ECE after years of sustained commitment and policy priority, which is the best result in Europe.

In 2002 the Government of the Flemish community of Belgium approved new regulations concerning the quality of services. Article 12 of the Quality Decree says: "Active attempts will be made to hire males as well as females and autochthonous as well as ethnic minorities as childcare workers and in staff functions". The Minister of Welfare and Equal Opportunity has also increased the salaries in the day-care centres by 30%. The Flemish Government launched a campaign to get more men into childcare in collaboration with the umbrella organisations and the University of Ghent. At the request of the umbrella organisations, the government has chosen a more gender neutral name for the care profession. The reference to care in the name of the worker was replaced by a more pedagogic word. As such, 'kinderverzorger' or 'childcarer' became 'kinderbegeleider' or 'companion of children'.

At the policy level it is important to increase the professional status of childcare work, through emphasis on training and qualification. In the UK, the Minister of Children Margaret Hodge said that “Increasing the professionalism of childcare will lead to better pay, both of which will attract more men into the sector” (Observer, 2005). However, in Scandinavian countries and also in Belgium – where early childhood teachers in kindergarten (2.5 until 6 years) earn the same salary as secondary-school teachers, more than 90% of the workforce is female. A better pay is thus an important condition to attract staff – male and female, but it is not enough to change the gender balance.

### **Men-friendly Training, Courses and Support**

“Training may have a greater potential to attract men than jobs alone” (Rolfe, 2005, p. 3) simply because qualified men are not available on the labour market. Everywhere in Europe initiatives are being developed to bring the few men in training together, so that they can support each other. In England and Scotland men-only childcare orientation programmes are very successful. The *Men in Childcare* project (Edinburgh) has run induction and taster courses, and access courses for more advanced training. The *Men in Childcare* project had 900 men who followed some form of training after a men-only introduction course. In Edinburgh there are now 25 fully qualified men working in childcare settings. Another 70 men are currently in training and 40 of them will be fully qualified in June 2007 (Spence, 2007).

In the training institution for Educateur Jeunes Enfants in Lyon (France), the gender issue as an aspect of working around diversity received considerable attention in the courses and several students consequently wrote papers and dissertations about men in early childcare and education. The message from the training institution that men were important in and the network of men and women around the issue of gender in ECE that was set up by the school, has decreased the number of male student dropouts from training and was seen as very supportive by male educators working in the early childhood institutions. (Ndjapou, 2007).

A number of local authorities in the UK offer a male mentor to new male childcare workers/teachers and student trainees. The National Childminding Association in the UK has set up a drop-in group for male childminders (Rolfe, 2005). In Norway the male childcare workers have their own association that organises meetings and social activities where trainees and experienced childcare workers can meet and talk about their work (Hauglund, 2005). In Belgium, all male childcare staff were invited to a meeting in May 2003. Most recently, in New Zealand a Men in Early Child Care and Teaching Summit was held for all men in training or working in services; and from this meeting a national network for male teachers is being set up (online [www.childforum.com](http://www.childforum.com))

In Scandinavian countries in the nineties, increasing the level of training had an effect on raising the popularity of childcare work among men (Cameron, 1997). There is evidence that it is not purely advertising and support which attracts and keeps men in childcare, but the nature of work, which has to be more knowledge-based and pedagogical (Cameron, 2006; Rolfe, 2005; Peeters, 2005). This gives a lot of

opportunities for New Zealand to increase male participation in early childhood teaching, because together with Norway, Sweden and Denmark, it has one of the highest levels of qualification in early childhood education.

An interesting example of how early childhood training could be made more attractive to men is the remodelling of the pedagogue course in the Kolding Paedagogseminarium (Wohlgemuth, 2003). They introduced the option “sport and outdoor activities” in their pedagogue course, which is at the bachelor level (18 years plus 3). The number of male students in the classes with the option “sports and outdoor activities” was 50% and the total number of male students in the institute rose from less than 15% to 24%.

A Belgian study (Vandenbroeck, Peeters, Vandenheede, Vereecke, Mannaert, 2006) has shown that a remodelling of the trainings for childcare is necessary. They screened all the materials used in the training courses for gender aspects. The results showed a very men-unfriendly picture of training in childcare, which very likely contributes to the large number of male dropouts. The study also shows that female secondary school teachers do not encourage young males to become childcare workers. Looking at the results of this study, one can conclude that a more men-friendly culture is needed in the training institutions in Belgium (and quite possibly in lots of other countries including New Zealand and Australia).

## **Recruitment**

Recruitment procedures must be considered if the gender in-balance in early child care and education is to change. Informal recruitment methods, like ‘word of mouth’ and the use of notice-boards disadvantage men, who are often less connected to childcare circles (Rolfe, 2005). Employers should be encouraged to use formal recruitment methods. A Belgian study (Peeters, 2005) has made a profile of the men working in early child care and education. Ninety percent of them worked as a volunteer in child and youth services or in sport clubs for children and youngsters. In Scotland *Men in Childcare* has had good experiences with advertising in the media that can reach young men who are involved as volunteers in child and youth work or in sports clubs for children (Spence, 2005).

In several European countries, there is an evolution in the early years sector towards centres with multiple functions. In the UK there are Children’s Centres, in Germany the Familienzentrum, in Flanders the Centra for Kinderopvang. All of these new centres not only try to develop the pedagogical function but also the social (support for families in need) and economic (flexible childcare) function of early childcare and education. This new approach enlarges the tasks of staff who have to work together with different organisations. This multi-disciplinary, multi-service approach may attract more men to the sector (Cameron et al, 1999; Peeters, 2005).

National campaigns to attract more men have been successful in Denmark, Norway, the UK and Belgium. Campaigns are perceived as very supportive for the male workers and trainees (Vandenbroeck, et al, 2006). The campaign has increased considerable the number of men working in childcare in the Flemish part of Belgium. In 2002 before the



campaign was set up only 0.9% of the workforce was male. In 2005 the number of men increased to 2.08% and in 2006 2.3% of the men in childcare were men. In absolute figures this is an increase from 142 men in 2002 to 415 men in 2006 (Kind en Gezin, 2007).

Career education and guidance can play an important part in encouraging men to consider working in early child care and education. The male workers of the Sheffield Children's Centre, for instance, have taken part in career events in schools in the city. Other local authorities are experimenting with special apprenticeship routes for young men, which can be effective in encouraging young men to consider childcare careers (Rolfe, 2005). British and Belgian research has suggested that courses for mature entrants would be particularly attractive to men who are considering childcare options (Cameron et al., 1999; Peeters, 2005). On the other hand, it is particularly difficult to encourage young men to consider a job in early childhood, which they regard as female at a time when they are developing their self-identity (Peeters, 2003). Female workers mostly have a seamless career, while most male workers have a rethought career (Cameron et al., 1999). This second-chance career suggests that some men may waste years in jobs they dislike (Peeters, 2005) because they did not know they liked working with children. Therefore, with better career education and guidance, men with skills and aptitudes for working with children could be recruited at a much earlier stage in their working lives (Rolfe, 2005).

### **A men and father-friendly climate in the ECE services**

A mixed-gender workforce is linked to a father-friendly climate in early childhood services. If centres are less women-centred it will be easier to attract male staff. In Flanders, a gender instrument has been developed to measure the father-friendly climate in the centres (Demuyne & Peeters, 2006). Most of the activities organised for 'parents' actually focus on women, and early childhood staff therefore have to rethink critically how to develop a climate that welcomes and attracts fathers as well as mothers.

In France the parental crèches are an important movement. There are more than 2000 small parental crèches managed by parents all over France. In most of the parental crèches, the parents are working with the children approximately eight hours a month, together with the professional early childhood teacher. A lot of fathers are taking up their responsibility to work four hours a month with the children at their crèche. This makes men visible in the parental crèches and gives them a place in the centre; in much the same way as fathers in New Zealand Playcentres and Te Kohanga Reo centres are involved and encouraged to volunteer for work in the programmes. This men-friendly climate attracts men to consider becoming a teaching/childcare professional. In some parental crèches, there is even a majority of men. There is a small crèche called 'Acidulles et Croque', which is run by men in Paris. Both the crèche's president and vice-president are fathers and the childcare worker is also a man. In addition, there is a parental crèche in Lyon where both educators are male. Although little empirical research has been done on this topic, there is lots of anecdotal evidence from practice that centres with a father-friendly climate are more attractive for men to work in.

## Conclusions

The early childhood workforce is almost exclusively female in all countries. Policy makers must emphasize the importance of male workers in early childhood policy documents.

Most men working in early childhood have chosen this as a rethought career. Therefore, adult/teacher education stands the best chance of getting more men in the sector. Providing appropriate career information for young males is also necessary. The recruitment methods have to focus more on men that have worked with children as volunteers in child, youth or sports clubs.

Networks have to be created for men working in early childhood services. These networks can attract new men and can avoid high turnover of male trainees and men working in the sector.

Improving the quality of training into a more men-friendly direction has been successful in several countries. Men-only courses and the support of male mentors have proven to be successful.

Countries with a high level of professionalism have greater chance of attracting men, but increasing the salaries alone will not lead to more male participation. The female workforce will continue to deter men from taking up the work, unless the sector is remodelled towards a more men-friendly culture so it does not constantly reproduce its own patterns in recruitment and training.

The notion of care is less attractive for men; but an emphasis on more social issues and on outdoor and sports has been successful to attract men. The predominance of part-time jobs is widely believed to deter men and full-time work options must be available. To change the gender balance, sustained commitment and policy priority is required for a period of at least ten years.

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