

Men in the Nursery Revisited: Issues of male workers and professionalism
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Abstract

Professionalising the early childhood workforce in terms of improving pay and conditions of work and employing male workers can be seen as independent trends: there is no necessary relationship between the two. However, when the definition of professionalism is extended to include the scope and quality of practice, the experiences and views of male and female workers may have a contribution to make. This paper is based on revisiting a study of male and female workers in childcare centres, analysed in terms of an extended definition of professionalism. It argues that the conditions necessary for changes to practice include developing a reflective approach to practice where debate and curiosity and practice are a constant feature of daily work.

Introduction

Male worker participation in childcare and early years work with young children is still rare but is becoming, in England, and has become, in some other European countries, accepted as a means of demonstrating gender equality and resolving labour shortages (Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC), 2003). A shift towards professionalisation of the early childhood workforce is also taking place in many countries. In England, this shift is taking place both at the policy level, with the aim of addressing goals such as improving the social and educational outcomes for children and increasing the availability and accessibility of early childhood services, and at the sector level, with increased identification with the notion of being a 'professional'. In other countries, the process of professionalisation has gone further. For example, in New Zealand and Sweden, the process of developing a workforce unified around a model of a single well-qualified worker is taking or has taken place, as part of developing a coherent early childhood service located within the discipline of a broadly based 'education' (Moss, 2004).

This paper sets out to examine the relationship between male worker entrance into the nearly all-female domain of early childhood work and the process of 'professionalisation' in that domain. It is argued that there is no necessary relationship between these two developments in the early childhood sector [1]. It is possible to recruit more men and not professionalise the workforce, and, equally, it is possible to professionalise and retain a highly gender segregated workforce, as is the case in Scandinavian countries. However, a process of rethinking practice can occur, inspired by the experiences of male workers in a previously all-female domain, which can contribute to being professional in early childhood services. The paper reviews current debates about male entrance to early childhood and about professionalisation and then revisits research findings about men working in childcare centres (Cameron, Moss & Owen, 1999), augmented with reference to more recent studies of men in care work, and, using one definition of professionalisation, examines the relationship, or the potential for a relationship between these two trends. The paper finishes by considering what developing such a relationship might indicate for the kind of roles adopted by childcare workers in England.

Male entrance into early childhood work

The issue of men working with young children in early childhood services is both emotive and highly topical. It is emotive because men caring for children has, in England since the 1980s, been associated with allegations of child abuse, derived in part from child abuse scandals in residential care homes for young people (Waterhouse, 2000), and in part from a long standing cultural unease about male carers (Evans, 2002; Owen 2004; Sargent 2005). It is topical in England because a policy shift has taken place to explicitly promote the employment of male workers in early childhood services through workforce targets (Department for Education and Skills, 2001) and more general exhortations to increase the diversity of the workforce (DfES, 2005).

This paper is concerned with gender in the sense that it focuses on how male workers' experiences of work are different from or similar to those of their female colleagues in early childhood services and what the implications for practice might be. Gender is understood as a social construct (Lorber and Farrell, 1991) and a fluid variable which shifts and changes in different contexts and at different times (Butler, 1990), according to the ways in which gendered characteristics are appropriated by individuals (Connell, 1987) or gendered expectations are embedded in institutional life (Cameron et al., 1999). It is now commonplace to work with the concept of 'multiple gender identities' in recognition of the many ways in which gender can be performed and gender identity shifted (Connell, 1995). However, exploration of fluidity and appropriation following internalisation of norms and assumptions must begin with a 'provisional acknowledgement of difference' (Rees and Garnsey 2003, p. 558). Gender is actively constructed by individuals in relation to their social context; difference can be seen as 'a continuum of outlook and behaviour' (Rees and Garnsey, 2003, p. 561).

Studies of male entry into non-traditional occupations such as early childhood services begin with a notion of gendered difference, that is, that male and female bodies can be categorised. For example, studies of gendered organizations (Acker, 1991) where the gender imbalance is extreme show the structural advantages of being male in the workforce. Men's solo or virtually solo status within the workforce has been described as representing a 'token' presence (Williams, 1995), whose pay is likely to be higher, and to have more advancement opportunities than that of female colleagues in an equivalent position, but to be paid less than their counterparts in male-dominated occupations (Lammi-Taskula, 1998). Moreover, structural processes and normative expectations ensure more rapid career promotion for men than women (Aspinwall & Drummond, 1989; Isaacs & Poole, 1996; Skelton, 1991). However, alongside this largely privileged position, men in non-traditional occupations, particularly those involving young children, often encounter queries about their status, expressed as surprise at their presence, disbelief in their abilities or suspicion about their motives (Williams, 1995; Murray, 1996; King, 1998; Cameron et al., 1999; Sargent, 2005). Such reactions may have the effect of keeping men out of the early childhood workforce and stem from both cultural unease about men as paid carers for young children and from men's 'token' presence. Were there to be more male workers, status queries may become less frequent (Cameron et al., 1999).

Professionalisation in the early childhood sector

There are many interpretations of 'professionalism' and what counts as professionalism is not universally understood (Oberheumer, 2004). Historically,

professionalism implies a unique body of knowledge, selected entry into the field and so a 'protected' or distinctive occupational identity (Crompton, 1987) and an altruistic commitment to service (Davies, 1995). In England, while there has been significant expansion of the early childhood sector, both in nursery classes in schools and particularly in day nurseries, it is questionable whether these criteria of being a 'professional' have been met, especially in 'care' provision (Ball, 1994). For example, the unique body of knowledge for childcare practice is not ensured through requirements for educational qualifications. Only half of the workforce in a day nursery need currently hold a relevant qualification, and this is pitched at a relatively low level, being equivalent to school leaving qualifications such as General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSEs) or 'A' Levels for those in supervisory positions (Sure Start, DfES & Department for Work and Pensions, 2003; Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, 1999). Moreover these qualifications can be gained through accreditation for training while employed, which means the body of knowledge acquired is as 'good' as that currently in use in practice or from previous employers. The 50 per cent requirement also means that up to half the workforce may not have had access to any 'unique body of knowledge' about the sector conveyed through formal training.

Moreover, entry to childcare work specifically is not, in an era of expansion, highly restricted. Childcare recruitment campaigns emphasise a knowledge base for working with children derived from personal characteristics such as patience, enthusiasm, a sense of responsibility and a sense of fun (Sure Start, 2005), rather than from academic study. The criterion around protective occupational identity may not be met either, at least for some workers. For example, male nursery workers may be confused for working in a horticultural environment (Cameron et al., 1999).

While Crompton's (1987) three dimensions of professionalisation: unique body of knowledge; restrictive entry; and protected identity have only partially been met in England, there are indications that a process of increased responsibilities and improved status for early childhood workers and the sector overall has occurred. Examples of this are the expansion of services to include multidisciplinary Children's Centres, and of training possibilities to include early childhood degrees, a leadership programme devised in part to meet the needs of managers in complex multidisciplinary settings, and the involvement of early childhood settings and workers in external liaison, through, for instance, safeguarding children in cases of suspected abuse (Department of Health, et al., 2003).

Alongside this trend towards professionalisation through greater recognition of early childhood work, there is altruistic commitment in comparison with poor pay and conditions and few benefits of employment (Cameron, Owen & Moss, 2001). Such poor conditions particularly apply in the private sector, where pay is lower than in the public sector (Simon, Owen, Moss & Cameron, 2003); fewer workers have pensions (Nursery World, 2004) or even paid meeting time (Cameron et al., 2001).

However, professionalism also implies distinctive sets of relations with those people who are the subject of professional intervention such as children, parents or clients, as well as with colleagues. The relational dimension of professionalism demands a different way of thinking about the issue (Davies, 1995). MacNaughton (2003, p. 252) defines being an early years professional as having specialized knowledge that enables

someone to work with children aged between birth and eight years of age and who belongs to a body of people who share a common purpose, standards and ethic in their work. Expanding on this, Oberhuemer (2004) discussed the idea of early childhood work as 'democratic professionalism', where the quality of action is key and components of the work are fourfold (at least). They include: interaction with children as social agents; using sustained shared thinking; highly developed listening skills and democratic dialogue. Democratic professionalism also includes centre management which features shared knowledge and distributive leadership; working with families including all parents with an inclusive approach. Furthermore this approach involves having a knowledge base which includes an awareness of multiple ways of knowing and a willingness/ability to reflect on assumptions/beliefs including pedagogy and ethical viewpoints.

Whether or not childcare practitioners enjoy 'professional' conditions of work, in terms of specialised knowledge or sense of collective endeavour there are signs that workers identify with *being* a professional. Mooney, Knight, Moss and Owen's (2001) study found that 63 per cent of childminders (family day care providers) agreed that they were professionals rather than 'just' doing a job. Cameron et al. (1999) found that, in a discussion about role models, female workers thought they were modelling being 'a professional' to children. It may be that early childhood workers are referring to a modified definition of being professional, centring on recognition of their role and a relational dimension of professionalism. The idea that adult-child relations are characterised by professional 'boundaries' that lead the relationship in certain directions (such as 'teaching' and 'learning'), and not others (such as 'friends'), may be particularly pertinent in a discussion of male employment and gendered working in early childhood. For example, what kinds of social relations do male and female workers report at work, and are there gendered limitations (or possibilities) to relations with children that are different for men compared to women?

Having outlined some of the progress in professionalisation in childcare services, this paper now considers patterns of, and policies about, male participation in early childhood work in more detail before examining Oberhuemer's (2004) elements of being professional in relation to findings from a study of male and female childcare practice to assess the likely contribution men may make to professionalism in both conditions of work and its practice.

Gendered staffing in early childhood services

The gender imbalance in childcare and early years work is extreme: very few occupations have fewer men. According to the UK census of 2001, there are 5,856 male childcare workers, while there are 266,700 childcare workers in total (Owen, 2004). Of this small total, male workers are more likely to be found in out of school childcare (nine per cent) than in day nurseries (two per cent), childminders or playgroups (one percent each) (Sure Start, 2004a). The rate is similar in the early education (schools) sector, where between one and two percent of workers with young children in nursery and primary schools are male. There has been no increase since 2001 (DfES, 2001) nor since the 1991 census (Cameron & Moss, 1998).

Little is known about why more men prefer to work in out of school childcare compared with services for very young children: possibilities are that the higher hourly rate of pay for these services is attractive (Sure Start, 2004b); that the sessional hours

suit the individuals concerned; that male workers prefer working with older children; or that cultural barriers exist to working with younger age groups.

Compared with male employment with other types of 'people' work, such as social care, nursing and teaching, men are least represented in childcare (two per cent), midwifery (less than 0.5 per cent) and as care assistants with elderly people (nine per cent) (Simon et al., 2003), suggesting that the very young, the very old and very intimate care are least attractive to men. Meanwhile, about one quarter of social care workers such as houseparents and residential wardens, and youth and community workers are male [2], nearly half of all secondary teachers are male, meantime only five percent of educational assistants are male. However, there are more nursing assistants (15 per cent) than more highly qualified and paid midwives [3] (Owen, 2004, p.c). A complex mix of factors may account for this patterning of male participation, including professional status, cultural meanings about care and the age of the cared-for persons. The argument that men in non-traditional work accrue structural advantages applies, in part, only to care work and related occupations. It may be that variables such as age and career ambitions interact with male entry to nursing as 'assistants'; that gendered cultural ideologies about teaching 'subjects' and not 'children' send more men in the direction of secondary teaching than primary; and that the absence of male midwifery is attributable at least in part to the legal ban on their practice until 1975 (Robinson, 1998). These possible cultural reasons for gender distribution in the care and related workforces may operate both from the perspective of possible entrants and be embedded within the employing and training institutions themselves.

The gender distribution among the early childhood workforce in other European countries is similar to that in England: there are relatively few male workers, and those there are tend to work with older children. The highest proportions of male workers are found in Denmark, which exemplifies this trend: two per cent of workers in nurseries with children under three, six per cent in kindergartens with children aged three-to-six-years, 24 per cent in out of school services, and 41 per cent in clubs for children over ten years (van Ewijk, Hens, Lammersen & Moss, 2002, p. 71). Recruitment campaigns in Denmark and Norway have had some effect at improving the proportion of male students: 25 per cent of Danish pedagogue students are male; but this training is at a higher level than in England (at degree level) and equips the graduate to work across a wide range of settings with children, young people and adults, not just in early childhood (ibid.). According to a recent study of care work with adults with severe disabilities, one quarter of those working with this client group in Denmark are male (Hansen & Jensen, 2004). In these countries, professionalisation in terms of extensive training, a unique body of knowledge and a distinctive occupational identity was achieved with an almost entirely female workforce, and before efforts were made to recruit more men (Jensen & Hansen, 2003).

Conversely, in Scotland there is a successful programme underway to recruit male workers to early childhood employment by altering the methods of entry and the characteristics of the training scheme - but without any particular process of professionalisation taking place (Hansen, Jensen & Moss, 2004). In this programme, potential male childcare workers complete one or more fully funded men-only training courses that are pitched at a range of levels, and are given advice and support about possible job opportunities. A mentoring scheme is available for full-time students. Both these examples show that there is no necessary relationship between

professionalisation and male worker entry to early childhood services: rather, powerful cultural and ideological barriers to men's participation in early childhood services may be at work that can, at least in part, be addressed through measures external to professionalisation processes.

The policy position on men and early years services

In the mid 1990s, there was a sense that men's employment in early childhood services was dangerous territory for policy: that perhaps there was a question mark over whether (in the light of a series of child abuse scandals in children's services) male workers should be encouraged at all (Pringle, 1998). This question mark has all but disappeared, with varying rationales deployed for increased male recruitment, to be achieved through targets in England (DfES, 2001) and Norway (Hauglund, 2004, p.c). Male workers were considered desirable to act as 'positive role models for boys' (DfEE, 1998, p. 225); and an underused pool of labour in the context of an expanding market (EOC, 2003). Another rationale for employing male workers was that of promoting gender equality in and out of the home, to enable more equally shared parental responsibilities and labour market participation between men and women (Jensen 1996; Cameron & Moss, 1998).

In sum, recent English government policy has approached the male childcare worker as a useful source of labour and with something unique and positive, their gender, to offer children. Changes in the policy approach are in line with public opinion: a survey in 2003 found that 84 per cent of parents would approve of male childcare workers for their children (Hinsliff, 2003). The shift away from considering male workers as potentially dangerous to young children (Finkelhor, Williams & Burns, 1988; Sargent, 2005; Owen, 2003) has not, however, substantively altered the proportion of male workers, even in countries where the discourse of 'danger' is not so prevalent, such as Norway and Denmark. Understanding why men's 'token' status in early childhood work gives rise to both structural advantage and suspicion, muddled or hostile messages about their motives despite little evidence may benefit from an examination of practice in the gendered organisations that are early childhood services.

Revisiting Men in the Nursery: male workers' contribution to professionalism

Research on male and female experiences and practice in early childhood work is necessarily limited to studying situations where there are very few men in comparison to the total staff group. However, there are rare but important exceptions where the staff group is evenly balanced (Meleady, 1998). The study being revisited here took place in the late 1990s, and included four parts:

- a) secondary analysis of the Labour Force Survey to improve the information base about childcare workers;
- b) a survey of childcare lecturers in further education colleges;
- c) a seminar in 1997 to debate issues of gender and services for young children with contributors from the USA, Norway and Denmark as well as the UK; and
- d) a study of men and women working in childcare centres in England.

The first three parts documented the marginal status of male workers in terms of presence in the workforce, lack of attention to recruiting male students in colleges, and the competing discourses of gender equality and risk that were represented by Scandinavian and Anglo-American debates on the issue of the employment of male workers (Owen, Cameron & Moss, 1998). The fourth part aimed to explore similarities and difference in experience of the work as reported by 11 men and ten women

participants working in nurseries, family centres and children's centres with children under three years of age in England, and through interviews with 77 parents of children attending the centres (hereafter 'childcare centres') [4]. The study began with a premise of possible difference based on gendered attributes and performance but it became much more concerned with the ways in which the gendered organization, in Acker's (1991) terms, the institutionalised assumptions about practice, were, over time, defined by the majority (female) gender. What did this mean for male entrants, the roles that could be adopted and the contribution to knowledge that could be made? Were the opportunities afforded by changing the gender balance in the institution being translated into discursive opportunities and the development of 'democratic professionalism' in the workforce (Oberhuemer, 2004)?

Men as visible

Male workers in early childhood education and care are highly visible as they are so unusual. Their presence on training courses and in workplaces cannot help but be noticed. All the workers and nearly all the parents interviewed supported the principle and practice of male workers. However, being in an minority of one or two among a staff group of twenty or more female workers could lead to them being, as one male worker said, cast in extreme terms:

I think men get stereotyped quite easily in [early childhood] settings and I think if you're seen as being quite sort of attractive, it ... creates a bit of a buzz ... and if you're not ... its almost as if, you're a useless man, sort of 'what does he know. Stereotyping men into polarized visions of 'maleness' meant men were open to scrutiny because of their novelty, scrutiny on women's terms, as well as scrutiny in terms of their performance as workers. Defining male workers through stereotypical gender performances may not assist the development of shared or specialised knowledge, nor may engaging in 'multiple ways of knowing' necessary for Oberhuemer's (2004) definition of professionalism. Alternatively, male workers can become confident about their gender difference and interpret it constructively. A male worker from a family centre argued that employing men to work with a child who has had negative, perhaps harmful experiences of men 'has got to evoke a response. I would hope to offer a different picture' of being a man. Being visible was constructed by this male worker as a positive contrast to other ways of being male that children may have witnessed. Offering a 'different picture' can then be shared knowledge, open to discussion among the staff group. Male workers can offer an added dimension to staff dynamics: their difference can prompt new ways of working with children or new perspectives for staff discussions about children's experiences within the setting. In terms of Oberhuemer's (2004) criteria for professionalism, using representations of difference through male presence can be a contribution to democratic professionalism.

Difference or no difference?

All the female staff, said there was 'no difference' between male and female workers in the allocation of tasks or roles in the childcare centres. Eliminating difference was sometimes a deliberate objective, as one female practitioner said: 'equality is important for the children to witness and there should be no differences between the men and the women workers'. Equality of opportunity was interpreted as everyone doing the 'same' as each other. For these workers 'difference' was the problem in the quest for gender equality, an important and well-established doctrine (Cameron et al. 1999). If there were different expectations of male and female workers, these tended to be shrouded in the idea of 'natural' or individual differences, as in the words of this male worker 'I

think it all boils down to how good the person is as a person really' and this female worker: 'I'm very much into an individual person and their individual needs'. In terms of generating shared specialised knowledge about working with young children, conceptualising difference on an individual rather than a gender category level, engages with the idea of multiple ways of knowing but risks rendering invisible gendered assumptions about the experiences and skills of 'men' and 'women' (or boys and girls).

Indeed, in parallel with this discourse of 'no difference' or sharing jobs equally, *male* childcare workers reported that unique expectations were made of them. They said they were asked and sometimes expected to do practical jobs around the building such as fixing things and changing light bulbs as this was 'naturally' something they were good at. There was an implicit expectation reported by some male workers that they would enjoy certain types of play, such as ball games, and playing with cars and trucks. As with Skelton's (1991) study of male student teachers, male childcare workers internalised gendered expectations of their practice. One male worker said that despite never being asked to, he found himself getting engaged in rough play:

I put myself on the floor and that's like an open invitation to anybody to jump on you...or if I'm out in the garden and there are footballs out there...I think sometimes the children have tendency of coming to me to play those things... they invariably draw me into their game with them.

However, awareness of assumptions did not always lead to following them through. Another male worker said he was conscious of reacting against performing in a stereotyped 'male' way:

[I am] aware of situations where men have functioned in a completely different way with children...when they're out in the garden, it's the men that are kicking the ball about and running up and down with it...and I've consciously tried to prevent myself getting sucked into that.

Despite the assertions of workers about sameness and 'equality', it appeared that in practice underlying gender divisions existed in childcare work. These were largely unarticulated and stemmed from predominant ideas about domestic divisions of labour, with male workers positioned as performing stereotypes of male tasks in families. Faced with this set of expectations about gendered work, male childcare workers adopted two broad strategies: they either integrated themselves into the model and, as one said: 'we all do the same', quickly followed by 'I do change the light bulbs'; or consciously set themselves apart by rejecting 'traditional' or 'normative' approaches to male and female difference.

For these multiple expressions of 'difference' to contribute to professionalism, we might look for evidence of dialogue, reflection on men's and women's experiences in staff discussion or the development of shared thinking on these issues. However, there appeared to be few opportunities in the childcare centres visited for critical reflections on men's roles or experiences; staff meetings were about planning and practical arrangements rather than practice differences. For early childhood professionalism to benefit from the contribution of male and female workers' sense of sameness and difference from and between each other it may be important to improve opportunities for critical discussion.

Marginalisation

Although male workers were widely welcomed, their experience was often one of marginalisation within childcare centres, similar to the position of ‘otherness’ reported elsewhere (King, 1998; Sumsion, 2000). In conceptualising gender difference as ‘sameness’; and in constructing gender difference as opaque in comparison to ‘individual’ difference, (some) male workers’ (occasionally but inadvertently) felt excluded. Such practices were vividly reported in comments male workers made about staff room conversations, where, as one male worker said ‘sometimes I simply can’t grasp what they are talking about’. A female worker confirmed this marginalisation of male workers in staff room conversations when she said ‘you do get less personal with a man sitting there’. Men’s sense of marginalisation is not necessarily structural: they can and do still progress to managerial roles in early childhood settings. Moreover, it is open to change: management and staff team practices, such as being open to reflective discussion about gendered roles and expectations, can have an impact on how marginalised (or not) male workers feel.

Being marginalised is not just a product of holding a minority gender status. Gendered ways of working are embedded in the way work with young children is conceptualised and carried out in English childcare centres (Cameron et al., 1999). More specifically, work with this age group is threaded with ideas about caring as substitute motherhood and male workers have to negotiate their position within this predominant ideology (ibid.). They can either conform to so-called natural gender divisions or they have to strike out and develop a new gender identity. One dilemma for male workers is that often female workers like the idea of male workers performing stereotypical ‘male’ functions, such as practical work and outdoor play, but the very male workers who are attracted to working with young children may have already decided such interpretations about ‘being male’ are not for them. Reflecting on experiences of being marginalised on account of gender status might contribute to whole staff knowledge of or skills in adopting an inclusive approach to working with families if it was a subject for discussion. There was no evidence at the time of the study that such sensitive issues were publicly debated.

Role models – a unique role for men?

The idea that male workers can provide young children, particularly boys, with a positive role model is commonly articulated (Rolfe, 2005; Sargent, 2005). Gender role models, based on the idea of adult transmission of desirable values and ways of being, are not necessarily effective (Gold & Reis, 1982). Nor is the application in relation to early childhood services always clear (Sargent, 2005, p. 254). Sargent (2005) noted three interpretations: being a living model of traditional masculinity; an embodiment of discipline; and representing an alternative, gentler form of masculinity than girls had witnessed at home. These findings echoed the confusion about role models reported by Cameron et al. (1999). We asked: what sorts of roles do workers model and who for? Are they a substitute father, a good friend, a playmate or a more specific source of familial or ethnic identification?

Moreover, female role modelling in early childhood services is rarely, if ever, discussed in gender terms (Cameron, 2001). Women workers in our study were clear they were modelling professionalism, by which they meant settings standards of social relations through their use of language and behaviour to which they would like children and/or parents to aspire (Cameron et al., 1999, p. 84). Male workers were divided: about half interpreted modelling as demonstrating aspects of their personal

self such as truthfulness and ‘good moral values’ and their characteristics such as being ‘loud’ and ‘affectionate’. One man said ‘I’m not trying to fill a gap. I’m just a nice man who works in the family centre’. The rest of the male workers saw the task of modelling being given to them because of their gender, such as when a man was asked to take a particular interest in talking to boys from lone mother households. He attributed this to: ‘just more of that role model pulling through’. One man drew attention to male workers’ potential role as a substitution for trustworthy familial figures in children’s lives when he said: ‘I may be the first man a child can trust’. This interpretation of male role models is largely as a substitute father; it is primarily using visible gender difference to approximate familial figures thought valuable for children in roughly similar ways to the use of female workers as substitute mothers.

However, one male worker rejected ascribed definitions of ‘being male’ to articulate his role modelling. He said:

I’d like to think that I’m a role model that questions the way men have to be...but I don’t consciously go out to do that, maybe I’m rejecting the old sort of stereotypes and role models that I had...by default that means I am something else...so many times the [children, parents, staff] say ‘oh, men can’t do that’ and I’ll say ‘well that’s just your experience of a man, you can’t say all men are like that’...I challenge them every time they say it.

This worker’s sense of self was regularly challenged by recourse to ‘traditional’ ideas of ‘what men do’ around children as articulated by children, parents and colleagues. His awareness of the different ‘old’ and ‘alternative’ possibilities of role models conveys the dilemma of the multiple ways of being ‘male’ in a care work role, shaped, largely, by the gendered assumptions held in the cultural environment: his way of being was only marked out because it ran contrary to others’ notions of acceptability.

Not only is there confusion about what role male workers are to model, but in situations where only one male worker is employed he cannot hope to embody all the different possibilities of ‘maleness’, to be a universal, all-purpose, comprehensive model of being a man. The idea of role models is also potentially problematic because it conceptualises children as largely passive receivers of transmitted values and knowledge. An alternative perspective is to see children and workers as constructing knowledge together, learning from each other (Rinaldi, 2005), in which case the role model is one of providing resources for children to make their own discoveries and identities. Here, the outcome of the role model is not to be ‘like’ the adult but is much less predictable.

Acting as a role model in terms of familial identification is the apparent preserve of male early childhood workers and their unique contribution to the specialised knowledge base. But the issue of what kind of male is wanted, or how to allow multiple models of being male is not yet resolved. This could (in part at least) be because of the way role models are seen as vehicles for learning by or transmission to children rather than as opportunities for collaborative adult-child ventures.

Rethinking professionalism: male workers in early childhood services

This paper has argued that a process of professionalisation is not necessarily related to increased numbers of men working in early childhood services: both processes can clearly occur independently of one another. To date, in no country have increased numbers of male workers prompted higher earnings, better conditions of work, more

restricted entry or more vigorous attempts to define a body of knowledge unique to work in early childhood services. Either the society has taken the view that early childhood work should be staffed with well-qualified workers and rewarded with average (or better) salaries and men have been recruited into a professionalised sector, or individual projects have targeted male recruits for training and employment and attracted them into an existing sector. Efforts to recruit more men into childcare work in Belgium have concluded that male entrants alone do not affect the pay and material conditions in a largely private sector market (Peeters, 2004, p.c).

Davies (1995, p. 149) argued that developing professionalism within the female dominated domain of nursing required 'dislodging the gendered model of profession' in order to incorporate 'caregiving' as an essential part of nursing: understanding practice meant redefining professional identity and status. Similarly, an investigation of gender issues in early childhood practice can make a contribution to Oberhuemer's (2004) 'democratic professionalism'. In particular, analyses of our research findings (Cameron et al., 1999) suggest that, potentially, male worker's experiences and perspectives could be contributing to the shared knowledge base of early childhood work, to inclusivity and to prompting reflective practice on multiple ways of knowing.

Part of accounting for male preferences to work with older children and part of the barrier to male participation in work with very young children is that there appeared, in our research, to be a predominant ideology that drew parallels between childcare work and mothering work [5] (Singer, 1993). Tellingly, although reluctant to use gender categories, male workers reported that women were much better than themselves at 'reading children's thoughts', 'being patient', offering physical comfort, and being 'a matriarchal figure' by which the male worker may be referring to the omnipresence of female-defined values in his work environment or may simply be referring to 'mother-like' practices. These attributes and skills did not, according to male workers, rely on being a mother but on being practised at empathy, and attuned to children's needs and often on indirect methods of communication. While the 'female way' was the norm, male workers' possibilities to use physical comfort were sometimes limited by rules, either self imposed or institutional, about contact with the children. Sargent (2005) also found that comforting children was the domain of women staff. Men's ways of being in childcare were not the 'norm'; they were implicitly or explicitly positioned in terms of 'otherness' (Sumsion, 2000). This reproduction of gendered understandings of what childcare constituted could also be seen in the deployment of male role models as substitute and more appropriate father figures.

Achieving a knowledge base that is shared between female and male workers arguably needs to make visible the reproduction of gendered assumptions outlined above. Working with inclusivity could benefit from a discursive approach to understanding the roles given to and adopted by male workers in early childhood services, for example through making explicit and problematising the relationship between men as fathers or men as playmates with men as practitioners. However, in order for any contribution to professionalism to begin, early childhood practice has to become curious about itself, learning how to puzzle about, or reflect on practice, with structured, valued opportunities to do it. This is close to Schön's (1983) concept of the 'reflective practitioner' or using expertise and experience to reflect on action taken or to be taken, which he argued is essential to the practice of a professional.

Exploring these issues of difference and equality, exploring what is the ‘norm’ and what is the ‘exception’ in childcare work could open the way for discussion of what it means to be a childcare worker, indeed what childcare work is for. Does the childcare worker follow some preordained pattern of work, as a ‘transmitter’ or technician trained to perform tasks, or does he or she think critically about and reflect on their work and how their gendered selves and gendered experiences contribute to the way things are done in the childcare centre? How do training and professional development institutions prepare workers for practice? Are notions of reflexivity built in, are they assumed or considered unimportant? This kind of challenge to practice (and training) could lead to a discussion of the contribution the childcare worker makes not only to supporting parents in employment and preparing children for school, but also to children’s identities and understandings of themselves as discovering, growing and gendered beings.

In turn, this revealing of the childcare workplace as a ‘gendered’ institution employing gendered discourses could envisage a different early childhood professional, one doing complex work in a modern and uncertain world where meanings are continually negotiated between children and adults and among adults. This professional is arguably radically different to the current childcare worker in England and is more akin to the Danish pedagogue who combines learning or education and looking after or care with a holistic approach to working with children, with parents and in communities. Arguably, having a professional education that offers a range of well-paid employment opportunities enjoying relatively good societal status contributes to the process of attracting men into the work.

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Endnotes

[1] The early childhood sector in England refers to childcare and education services for children under compulsory school age such as nursery schools and classes, day nurseries, childminders and playgroups. In this paper I focus on *childcare* occupations and day nurseries in particular.

[2] Analyses from the Labour Force Survey from 2001/2, the largest of the government’s regular household survey, collecting data from 60,000 UK private households per quarter (Owen, 2004, p.c).

[3] Analyses from UK Census 2001 (Owen, 2004, p.c).

[4] Full details of analysis are reported elsewhere (Cameron et al. 1999)

[5] Fieldwork for this study was carried out before the advent of the Foundation Stage and ways of thinking about practice may have changed since.

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