



## Briefing Paper: Men in Early Childhood Education

*New Zealand Journal of Teachers' Work, Volume 6, Issue 1, 28-34, 2009*

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### ABSTRACT

*Male participation in the early childhood education (ECE) workforce in Aotearoa New Zealand is minimal. This concise briefing paper to the Minister of Education (which was part of a third year course assignment) discusses the advantages and disadvantages of increasing the number of male early childhood educators and addresses whether specific government intervention would be beneficial.*

### MEN IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

#### **1. Background**

Less than 1% of those working in early childhood education in New Zealand are male, one of lowest participation rates in the world (Farquhar, Cabik, Buckingham, Butler & Ballantyne, 2006). In comparison, the rate in the United States is 2% (Sargent, 2004), with the highest rate in Europe being 9% in Norway (Peeters, 2007). The latter was achieved through government intervention. To date, there has been no government intervention to increase the number of male educators in New Zealand.

#### **2. Why is male participation low?**

Many reasons for low participation have been proposed including cultural beliefs regarding childrearing, status, pay, stereotyping, prejudice and discrimination. Early childhood education has been regarded as substitute mothering (Adams, Openshaw & Hamer, 2005; Dau, 2001; Peeters, 2007). The relatively low status of early childhood education and associated low pay may also contribute to men's reluctance to consider it as a career (Cooney & Bittner, 2001). It is perhaps possible that the predominantly female workforce is self-perpetuating, repeating the same patterns of recruitment and training (Peeters, 2007). High profile sex abuse cases in the early 1990s involving Peter Ellis and Geoffrey Scott also reduced public support for male educators in New Zealand (Farquhar, 2005).

### **3. Current policy**

*Pathways to the Future* (Ministry of Education, 2002), the strategic plan for ECE, does not specifically address the shortage of male educators and there is no existing government policy to increase the recruitment of men. However, the Desirable Objectives and Practices (Ministry of Education, 1998) mandate that employers should implement policies that are inclusive and equitable and reflect the principles of equal employment opportunities.

### **4. Advantages and disadvantages of increasing male educators**

There are a number of advantages and disadvantages of increasing male educators. Questions may be raised about the safety of children and the potential for men to be abusers. However, most perpetrators of abuse are heterosexual men present in the child's home environment (Dau, 2001). In addition, research in the United States showed 40% of known abusers in childcare were women (Finkelhor, *et al.*, as cited in Owen, 2003). There is also an argument that increasing male participation in early childhood could reinforce traditional hegemonic views of masculinity and perpetuate inequality (Dau, 2001). This could include men being preferentially selected for employment and advancement. Conversely, male educators potentially face the same disadvantages as females working in male dominated environment (Sargent, 2004).

*Te Whāriki* requires children to 'experience an environment where there are equitable opportunities for learning, irrespective of gender' (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 66). Currently boys may actually be disadvantaged as research points to women favouring girls (Farquhar, 2005) and reinforcing feminine attributes (Cooney & Bittner, 2001). It has been suggested that 'boys require a deep-level essential experience of masculinity to connect with' (Dau, 2001, p. 148). Female educators are more likely than males to view unruly play as aggressive and have a negative impression of more masculine behaviours (Tavecchio, as cited in Peeters, 2007). Male educators may particularly help boys who are lacking in positive male role models at home. Overall, it is considered that treating boys and girls equitably is more easily achieved with a mixed-gendered workforce (Jensen, as cited in Peeters, 2007).

An alternative view is that learning gender is complex (Dau, 2001) and that the overall quality of teaching is more important than the teacher's gender (Harty, 2007). However, well-educated male educators could help both boys and girls reconstruct new ideas of masculinity (Sumsion, 1999). If men are more visible in the early childhood setting carrying out caring roles, this could potentially help to counter stereotypes of both men and women, reduce sexism and generally advance gender equality (Farquhar, 2005). More male teachers would also encourage fathers to feel more comfortable about participating in ECE settings. Dau (2001, p. 154) suggests 'a society based on true equality and respect will have men working with young children, so we need to build such a place'. A recent survey undertaken in Britain by the Children's Workforce Development Council (2009) supports this showing that 55% of parents want a male carer to work with their child.

## **OPTIONS FOR INCREASING MALE PARTICIPATION**

In Europe no countries have managed to increase male participation without specific government policies to encourage it (Peeters, 2007). Initiatives for change need to be supported at all levels through government, the media, training organisations, employment organisations, employers, parents and educators. Moss believes that any initiatives need to be sustained for at least ten years to be effective (as cited in Peeters, 2007).

The government could support the recruitment and retention of men by:

### **1. *Introducing a target for men in ECE***

Many European countries have set specific targets for male participation. For example, in the year 2000 the British Government set a target of 6% by 2004 (Owen, 2003) while the Childcare Network of the European Commission aimed for 20%, to be attained over 10 years (Peeters, 2007).

### **2. *Improving the status of ECE***

Professional status is considered important in attracting men to the sector (Owen, 2003; Peeters, 2007). The commitment to ensuring that all teachers in teacher-led services are qualified and registered by 2012 should increase the status of ECE, as would rolling out pay parity for Kindergarten teachers to other qualified ECE teachers. Integrating services for children to include ECE, health, referrals and other economic and social family support could also broaden the scope and appeal of the profession (Peeters, 2007) as well as providing a better service for families.

### **3. *Providing targeted training and scholarships***

This could be achieved by working with training organisations to provide courses more suited to male involvement. Male only courses have proved successful in Scotland as has the provision of male mentors (Peeters, 2007). Teach NZ scholarships for training could be offered to all men, regardless of income or ethnicity.

### **4. *National advertising***

Advertising focusing on male involvement in ECE would promote the profession and reduce negative stereotyping. Promotion could range from including images of male participation on leaflets and posters to television commercials.

### **5. *Ensuring equality in working conditions***

By reviewing early childhood legislation to ensure that it offers equal rights to men and women and that it safeguards both sexes and children – for example, by encouraging open plan environments in ECE settings.

### **6. Indirect advocacy**

Work could be carried out with advocacy organisations such as the Men in Early Childhood Network to enable them to help training providers, schools, ECE services and other key organisations in the early childhood sector to encourage and support male recruitment.

## **CONCLUSION/ RECOMMENDATIONS**

This paper considers the low participation of men in early childhood education and the possible benefits and drawbacks of increased participation. Overall, increasing male participation in ECE would benefit young children and encourage gender equality and some possible options are proposed on how this could be achieved.

Before making a final decision, it is recommended that the government consult with key early childhood organisations, training organisations and parent groups to further assess the need to increase male participation in ECE and how this might best be supported. The government may also wish to consider further research into the benefits of male participation in ECE in the New Zealand context.

## **FURTHER READING**

Cooney, M., & Bittner, M. (2001, Winter). Men in early childhood education: Their emergent issues. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 29(2), 77-82.

*Margaret Cooney* is a professor of early childhood education. She and Mark Bittner are members of the Interdisciplinary Early Childhood programme at the University of Wyoming. This paper discusses qualitative research carried out with male ECE teachers to explore their emergent issues. The discussion addresses salaries, what influenced the men to become teachers, training, recruitment, and the advantages and disadvantages of working in a female dominated field.

Farquhar, S. (2007). The proceedings of the first New Zealand men in early child care and teaching summit and a record of the challenges, changes and thinking in the area. Information on this publication is available from [www.childforum.com/publication\\_details.asp?REF\\_NO=27](http://www.childforum.com/publication_details.asp?REF_NO=27)

*Sarah Farquhar* is the CEO of the Early Childhood Council and the founder and coordinator of the New Zealand Early Childhood Research Network. This publication is a summary of the first New Zealand Men in ECE conference. It includes multiple perspectives on the challenges for men working in this sector and discusses possibilities for recruiting and retaining men in ECE.

Harty, R. (2007). The men as role models argument: A case for researching children's views. *NZ Research in Early Childhood Education Journal*, 10, 183-190.

*Richard Harty* is a lecturer in Early Childhood Studies at the University of East London. This research paper considers the value of men as role models particularly from the child's perspective. The paper concludes that children consider the qualities of the teacher to be more important than their gender.

Owen, C. (2003, June). *Men's work? Changing the gender mix of the childcare and early years workforce*. Retrieved June 4, 2009, from [www.daycaretrust.org.uk/data/files/Policy/Policy\\_Archive/mens\\_work\\_changing\\_the\\_gender\\_mix\\_of\\_the\\_childcare\\_and\\_early\\_years\\_workforce.pdf](http://www.daycaretrust.org.uk/data/files/Policy/Policy_Archive/mens_work_changing_the_gender_mix_of_the_childcare_and_early_years_workforce.pdf)

*Charlie Owen* is a Senior Research Officer at London University's Institute of Education. This paper is a policy paper commissioned by the Daycare Trust. It discusses the role of fathers in their children's care, gender equality, the labour market, the needs of children, and child protection. It also considers policy options to increase male participation.

Peeters, J. (2007). Including men in early childhood education: Insights from the European experience. *NZ Research in Early Childhood Education Journal*, 10, 15-24.

*Jan Peeters* is director of the resource centre for ECE at Ghent University, Belgium. He is an active member of the European Men in Childcare Network. This paper discusses why ECE is so gendered and suggests various measures, some of which have been successfully employed in Europe, to increase male participation. Some reference is made to the New Zealand context.

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Julie Jones is a kaiako at Oanaka Educare, Wanaka, teaching children aged 3 to 5. She moved to New Zealand from the UK in 1998 and worked for 9 years at a Montessori preschool in various roles including Centre Manager. Prior to this she was employed as a Marketing Manager in London. She holds a BSc (Hons) in Zoology and Psychology, a Diploma of Marketing, and has recently completed a Diploma of Early Childhood Education with the Open Polytechnic of New Zealand. She is looking forward to continuing her journey of teaching and learning and has a particular interest in helping young children to develop critical thinking skills.

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