

Under-representation of males in the early years: The challenges leaders face

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Management in Education
27(2) 63–69
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(BELMAS)
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DOI: 10.1177/0892020612470961
mie.sagepub.com



Abstract

This article investigates why there appears to be an under-representation of males in comparison to their female colleagues in the Early Years (EY) sector, and the perception of male teachers progressing more quickly to leadership positions when they do enter this context. Using case studies of final year male students on an Initial Teacher Training (ITT) undergraduate degree course at one university, we attempt to analyse data on male under-representation in Early Years against contemporary theories of identity, power and leadership. Questionnaires and interviews were conducted with the male sample group and male senior leaders in primary schools to gain an overview as to the leadership support they needed and provided. Our tentative findings suggested that male trainees are happy to work in an Early Years context and take leadership positions, but the challenge for leaders is that male trainees require strong leadership mentoring processes to help overcome perceived contextual barriers.

Keywords

Early Years, ITT, leadership, male, mentoring, stereotyping

Context

The Early Years (EY) sector in England provides a crucial role in ensuring the quality of care and provision for children aged 0–5 years. One of the challenges for EY leadership is how to encourage more male leaders to counterbalance the largely feminized workforce (Miller and Cable, 2011). A reason for this could be that EY leadership is an area in which male practitioners feel uncomfortable owing to the ‘close nature of working with very young children’ in comparison to their female colleagues (Miller and Cable, 2011: 24). According to Rolfe (2006: 1), another reason for this challenge is that recruitment and retention in EY is ‘undoubtedly the sector’s over-reliance on a small section of the labour force: young white women’. But this is purely speculative and the need to theorize this area with evidence is urgently required, which is the reason for undertaking this research.

Historically, schools are organizations that have, over time, established what Connell (2002: 53) has termed a ‘gender regime’. These regimes appear to work to maintain existing gender norms within organizations. For example, in primary schools, it is more likely that everyday practices can operate to perpetuate the dominant construction of EY teaching as more suitable for females than males. Male EY practitioners, therefore, can be perceived to be highly conspicuous and subjected to considerable suspicion. This highly gendered perception can problematize the participation of male practitioners in the EY. Notwithstanding calls

in the popular media for the involvement of more men to ‘compensate’ for the occupational gender imbalance of EY, a common perception is that men who choose to work with young children are often assumed to be ‘either homosexuals, pedophiles or principals in training’ (King, 1998: 3, reported in Sumsion, 2000: 130). The pervasiveness of these perceptions means that male EY practitioners are likely to encounter considerable suspicion concerning their motivation for their career choice in EY.

Literature

In order to understand the vital role played by leaders in providing quality provision in EY, a number of factors need to be considered. First, the current training of EY practitioners introduces them to the rudiments of leadership theories, but their focus initially is on child-centred education and care rather than effective leadership at this early stage. Secondly, it is not sufficient to teach theories of leadership styles and traits without developing their understanding of human resource management, change management and conflict resolution, to name a few key areas. Thirdly, it is crucial that EY trainees understand

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theories of child development and child psychology so they can plan for effective teaching and learning. Fourthly, what can we learn from looking at leadership styles of men and women? Scrivens (2002) from New Zealand reviewed female constructions of leadership and suggested that EY leaders tend to use male-oriented ideas of leadership rather than developing their own styles developed from reflections on leadership theory and their practice. Female EY practitioners often report that they are unprepared to undertake leadership roles and responsibilities (Ebbeck and Waniganayake, 2003; Muijs et al., 2004; Rodd, 2006).

Studies on gender differences within EY education are not new. The issue of gender, very much like diversity and equity in education, appear to trigger in people signs of 'silence, blindness and fear' (Rusch, 2004: 19). Perhaps these may be legitimate reactions of the unknown. But over the years we have seen little change in the deployment of male teacher trainees in the EY sector and even little attitude change (Lumby and Coleman, 2007). In addition, Rolfe (2006) also suggests that 'well-motivated individuals with the qualities required to work with children are likely to be ignored if the recruitment pool is restricted by gender'. Cameron (2001) found in a 1991 UK census that a very small percentage of the workforce in nursery/primary teachers were male. Indeed, our own sample is so small that we wonder what, if anything, has really changed on the recruitment and retention front. So like Cameron, we were cautious in advancing strategies that may improve male recruitment, and more importantly, their retention and development as professionals. This was a major issue for leadership to address which Cameron only hinted at.

To change attitudes and culture requires the need to 'deconstruct, understand and confront' the way organizations function (Reynolds and Trehan, 2003: 167), and this requires a better understanding of learning and equity issues (Firestone and Riehl, 2005; Muijs et al., 2004), as well as building collaborative relationships (Aubrey, 2011).

What may be required for managing diversity is the development of leadership mindscape as suggested by Sergiovanni (2005). To conceptualize leadership for diversity management might require the sharing of personal mindscapes with those imagined by staff and even the learners, especially in relation to EY. Theories of change management (Bush et al., 2006; Glatter, 2008), cultural management (Leithwood et al., 2006) and organizational development (Hartley and Hinksman, 2003) offer us a good start.

Gender stereotypes or sensitivities about child abuse may mean that male trainees encounter prejudice (Coleman, 2007: 45); thus, such a small number of them become EY practitioners (Cushman, 2005). But what we have observed in our research of the literature is a recurring theme of representation of males in EY as a source of suspicion (Cushman, 2005). Much of the literature is linked to the stereotype that leaders are male, while women may be perceived primarily as carers, and therefore initially as outsiders in the field of leadership (Coleman, 2007). Normative leadership literature assumes that male leaders in classroom situations can be rationalized, and there is a logical action that follows. But, understanding group dynamics is complex and

we all behave differently to individuals, to men and women, and when they are a member of a group, where we perceive the individual not as an individual – not as part of a group – but as 'women' or 'gay' or 'men'. Our relations with others are shaped by the fact that they are 'strangers' (Lumby, 2007: 31, citing Gudykunst, 1995: 10). This suggests that the interaction and dynamics between people is multifaceted. Lumby advocates that at both levels of individual and group, responding to 'strangers' will involve both cognitive and affective conscious and unconscious strategies (Lumby, 2007: 32). These outcomes may well manifest as rage, confusion or anxiety (Di Tomaso and Hooijberg, 1996; Prasad and Mills, 1997; Rusch, 2004). Milliken and Martins (1996) explain that strangeness may increase anxiety within relationships suggesting that there is greater negative reaction to gender (or to ethnicity) than to age; therefore, understanding the notion of strangeness is a complex matter.

Sociobiological theories may offer a perspective on communicating with strangers (Sapolsky, 2002), and social constructionists an alternative perspective (Gantt and Reber, 1999). There is little in-depth research on the issue of male practitioners in EY, and what is needed is focused research on the mixed-gender workforce in EY, and young people's attitudes towards working in the EY sector (Rentzou, 2011: 145). Interestingly, Rentzou (2011: 144) observes in her study with Greek parents that their attitudes towards employing male practitioners seemed positive, but that this may well be feigned. Further research is needed in order to explore these issues.

We acknowledge that to change thinking on issues like stereotyping in EY and the valuing of otherness/strangers will take time, and that this requires leadership at different levels within the institution; this may also involve alliances and allegiances from community groups like school partners and parents. Action for change is needed to benefit all individuals. Analysing the values as an individual leader to develop a better understanding of mindfulness (Gudykunst, 1995) is a helpful starting point and may help to influence others. As male trainees enter schools, there is potentially a special place for mentoring and in the use of role models in their development (Bush et al., 2006; Lumby et al., 2005). The valuing of difference is important to develop the conscious state (Capper et al., 2006), as is the need to debate critically how the principles outlined by Law (2006) interact and inform gender, race, class, age, disability and sexuality, amongst other diversity issues.

Research methods

This article investigates why there is a lack of male teachers in the EY age range in primary schools in England. The sample group consisted of male trainee students on one four year undergraduate ITT course who were in their final year of study. We chose all nine year four male ITT trainees as our sample (as this represented the total sample group) because they would have been exposed to leadership theories within the course at the university and would have had experience of different leadership styles in their school placements, some of which were in EY. We wanted to capture

these experiences through listening to them. We chose to interview 20 male head teachers in primary schools to see if they had specific views as male leaders on why some male practitioners did, or did not prefer working in EY settings and to understand how they managed their workforce diversity in relation to gender. In the end, only ten head teachers were interviewed (as others were too busy) face-to-face to capture in-depth comments. We chose male leaders as their views as male heads were important to capture the 'fresh images and insight coming from exploring the real stories about themselves' (Bush, 1995: 19). We were also keen to know whether organizational culture, leadership styles and support available to male trainees specifically made a difference in addressing the shortage of male teachers in the EY. By adopting loosely structured thematic interviews (Kvale, 1996), head teachers were allowed flexibility of expression. Interview questions were sent out to these heads prior to interviews. The discussions were recorded in the field and subsequently transcribed and returned to participants to check for accuracy. The size and range of the sample does not give a basis for generalization, but there appears to be resonance of our findings with those of other studies. A limitation of this study is its relative narrow scope, and there are many other factors that may deter male practitioners entering EY settings.

To that end, we focused on one research question: What are school leaders doing to make early years teaching more attractive for males?

Data analysis is divided into two sections – year four male trainee views and male head teacher views – and for pragmatic and anonymity reasons we have called the students 'year four trainees' and to maintain confidentiality the leaders are given initials. For illustrative purposes, verbatim comments from participants are included throughout. Ethical issues (BERA, 2004) were adhered to through presenting a letter of introduction and code of conduct for research(ers) sent to the separate schools to gain access to the school and head teachers. The right to withdraw from research was clearly explained, and all were happy to participate in the research.

Discussion

Trainees' perspectives

Carrington and Skelton (2003) in their research reported male students mocking another male student who selected EY as a specialism at university. They called him 'the old woman' and asked him: 'why he wanted to work with the babies' (Carrington and Skelton, 2003: 260). Some female students also voiced their thoughts that male teachers 'were just not suited' as 'it wasn't natural' for a man (Carrington and Skelton, 2003: 260). These seem to be stereotypical views held then, and it is worth exploring to what extent these are stereotypical views or whether they have some foundation conceptually. So caring as an attribute is stereotyped as a female quality – a claim that can work to exclude male trainees from teaching in EY as 'care can be seen as a performance of gender' (King, 1998: 125). Carrington (2003) describes a female

telling her male partner that as a male he would not be able to cope with young children. Interestingly, findings from Szwed's study (2010) on gender balance in primary initial teacher education in England suggest that anxieties related to child abuse and physical contact with young children are not gender specific, and Szwed posits that these stereotypes need to be challenged. Perhaps what is needed as supported in the literature is a balanced workforce that attracts the most competent teachers regardless of gender (Cushman, 2005). Our evidence mirrors some of the stereotypes as observed by a selection of year four trainees' comments:

I have been in schools where many of the EY children come from single-parent families and have no real male role models. These children benefit greatly from having that male influence on their life in EY. (Trainee 1)

I feel that although it is rare, it is vital for children to experience good male role models in education throughout their development, but especially in EY. (Trainee 2)

Rusch had reported that the issue of gender appears to trigger in people signs of 'silence, blindness and fear' (Rusch, 2004: 19). Perhaps these may be legitimate reactions of the unknown, and it is only when we weigh up evidence fairly and impartially (Law, 2006) that some sense of rational perspective can be brought about to change the different attitudes. The literature cited earlier points to the need to value difference to develop the conscious state (Capper et al., 2006), but effective leaders will need to understand the mindscapes of their male trainees, and through a dialogic approach and supportive learning culture deepen them to better navigate their world. One year four trainee reflects positively on the need for male role models being 'good for all children in the EY stage', which differs from what Brownhill (2010) found.

What is interesting from our small scale study is that some parents found it difficult to see male trainees working within the EY setting as highlighted by these year four male trainees' observations:

Unfortunately, I think that there is still a slight stigma about males working with children that young, especially in schools that have completely or predominantly female staff. Not from the staff themselves but more from the parents. Which is a shame as I have been in schools where many of the EY's children come from single-parent families, and have no real male role models. These children benefit greatly from having that influence on their life. (Trainee 3)

I feel that although it is rare, it is vital for children to experience male role models in education throughout their development especially in EY. (Trainee 4)

Men can/are perceived as intimidating/threatening to some early years children and their parents, even though nothing is said. (Trainee 5)

It is perceived by many parents as a woman's work. (Trainee 6)

Increased risk of being wrongly accused of indecent behaviour by parents and parent helpers. (Trainee 7)

Overcoming social stereotypes of men working with young children. Children at that age tend to still need more emotional mothering than older children and it can seem unusual for a man to provide this level of sensitivity in the delivery of the child's education. (Trainee 8)

I don't think there are any real barriers. It is only what you perceive to be one. (Trainee 9)

From male trainee's perspective, their perceptions of challenging gender stereotyping seem to reflect in similar ways to what some of the leaders were commenting upon:

Overcoming social stereotypes of men working with young children is hard. Children at an EY age tend to still need more emotional mothering than older children and it can seem unusual for a man to provide this level of sensitivity in the delivery of the child's education. (Trainee 3)

Parental views on having a male as their child's class teacher in EY. Stigma attached to males in this area (question of sexuality). (Trainee 1)

What will the parents think of me? Some fathers don't seem to like men teaching their children in EY. (Trainee 5)

As a male, there is more female dominance in EY (more so than KS1). (Trainee 9)

Having the right mind-set to want to teach EY and be able to work in a less structured environment by understanding its importance. (Trainee 7)

Addressing such misconceptions arising from reality or myths is complex, requiring analysis based on the culture, attitudes, societal values and beliefs and the mind-set of people. Lumby and Coleman had talked about shifting attitudes through 'persistent renegotiation' (Lumby and Coleman, 2007: 96). We turn briefly to different leadership styles to see if there are any lessons to be drawn from them in leading change and addressing such challenges.

Authentic leadership (Leithwood et al., 2006) as a model appears to be one such approach being founded on humanistic values around equity and social justice, empathy and a strong link between their espoused values and actions (Glatter, 2008: 9). Evidence by PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) (2007) suggests that softer skills based around interpersonal relationships and motivation are equally important leadership attributes in managing complexity. Clearly, a simplistic change model is suggested here, and any innovation will require achieving an appropriate balance of change and stability and control and flexibility (Glatter, 2008: 9).

We turn to data from the male leaders' perspectives on the notion of gender stereotyping and how perceived barriers be dismantled.

Head teachers' perspectives

Gender imbalance can not be such a 'big issue' (Leader A) for some leaders as 'I have not really thought about this . . . perhaps subliminally I might have' (Leader B). Our leaders in the sample were more concerned with getting the right professional into EY, as this comment illustrates, 'someone who has good knowledge and understanding of the EY curriculum and good with children' rather than looking for a

specific male or female (Leader C). A number of heads were at pains to say that effective leadership in the EY setting was not a domain of men or women, but it applied to any professional, as observed by these comments:

I think people get hung up on the gender issue. I look for the right people: skills, qualities and attributes. Yes, there's a place for good male role model, but also for good female role model. I believe that in a school, a mix of male/female adults is positive and helpful, though we cannot and should not recruit on the basis of gender. (Leader D)

I've worked in schools with male and female leaders, and obviously I know both now, it's not so much the gender as how easy the person is to relate to that makes the difference, goes back to McGregor's theory on how people are valued in an institution. (Leader E)

Gender is irrelevant. Yes, men and women are different, as are boys and girls, but a good leader is a good leader. Styles vary from man to man and woman to woman and I've met both superb and awful leaders – of both sexes. By the way, trust me, this is true! (Leader F)

We probed further to ask what the perceptions of male leaders in relation to gender stereotyping were. The main message from interviewing the male leaders reflected the ethos of caring and nurturing of young children, consequently regarded as women's work (Aubrey, 2011; King, 1998). Men were seen to be 'as capable in nurturing young children' (emphasis added as a comparison) (Leader G). Many of the leaders explained that some of the ambiguous and stereotypical views were still pervasive but that, with more men entering EY and taking on a whole variety of roles that were once considered to be highly gendered, this has now counteracted some suspicion of why men make this career choice.

It's a public perception that early years teachers should be female and upper KS2 teachers male. I know some highly effective male early year's teachers. (Leader H)

It is incumbent upon the individual to counteract false perception. (Leader I)

Perception that it's not for men, I initially enrolled to specialize in KS2, but was placed, along with several other colleagues, both male and female in an infant setting for a group teaching placement so that we could be sure that we had made the right decision. I changed – and never looked back. (Leader J)

However, there is a view, as exemplified by one leader, that, gender should not be an issue when recruiting, as long as the workforce balance reflects the local context.

We look for the right person to fit in with our ethos and ways of working. So we try to have gender balance but this is not the most important point when recruiting. (Leader K)

This notion can problematize the participation of male teachers in the EY on how men negotiate their otherness. Interestingly, Sumsion (2000: 130) notes that little is known on how male childhood teachers 'cultivate, resist

or acquiesce' in gender stereotyping when constructing their professional identity.

We explored with the leaders the notion of teachers being role models, and whether male EY teachers were seen to be role models. Indeed, none of the leaders asked us to define role model and we assumed, correctly or not, that role model was understood to be 'a person you respect, follow, look up to or want to be like' (Brownhill, 2010: 4, cited in Bricheno and Thornton, 2007: 385). As one leader observed, 'In defining such a concept is very difficult as we bring in different experiences, expectations and knowledge and it is very much context and situation based as well'. (Leader L)

Another leader (M) commented that 'two of our male teachers are very good role models for all our children' without detailing any such practice, and leader (N) noted that, 'as a head some children were initially fearful of me, thinking they have been sent to him for doing something wrong ... but over time now ... they feel more relaxed and confident with me'. Here, based on Bricheno and Thornton's (2007) notion of a role model being 'followed' or 'looked up to' does not quite emulate these behaviours. This challenges the notion of males only being the role models; indeed, as Brownhill posits, 'both genders could be considered to be role models (Brownhill, 2010: 9) ... as long as they can model both 'natural' masculine and feminine traits' (Brownhill, 2010: 12). It is therefore crucial to challenge the trivializing of 'feminisation and masculinisation in primary schools' (Chan, 2011: 746), and it becomes necessary that school leaders should (re)examine their beliefs and discourses of gender difference and work together to develop a common understanding for the good of all children and staff.

A number of studies have shown that males find teaching unattractive (Brownhill, 2010; Skelton, 2007). But there are very few studies to substantiate these assertions for males entering the EY sector. So the challenges posed may have to be addressed by investigating what the reasons are of such barriers, perceived or real. For some the barriers were:

Perceived barriers which are unwritten, such as parents, or a culture that a female workforce is better. (Leader O)

I still feel that society perceives that Early Years teaching is not for men. I chose to specialize in KS2 as it seemed to be the norm at the time. However, my experience in KS1 and Early Years is what helped me to become a head teacher today. (Leader P)

There are no real barriers to entry. It's a public perception that EY teachers should be female and upper KS2 teachers male. I know some highly effective male early year's teachers. (Leader Q)

Challenges faced by leaders

From our evidence, year 4 male trainees were looking for support in their development in schools through: 'mentoring'; 'clear periodical feedback'; and 'guidance and support in planning and assessment'. Some strategies

identified for change were identified, and included: 'recognise inequality and tackle it urgently' (Leader P); 'don't be afraid to break down stereotypes' (year 4 trainee); 'changing oneself' (Lumby and Coleman, 2007: 67); 'put oneself into other's cognitive position' (Maznevski, 1994: 43). Changing organizational structures and process is also necessary as a strategy to manage attitudinal and behavioural change (Di Tomaso and Hooijberg, 1996).

Conclusion

It is suggested that children in EY can benefit from seeing male trainees in caring and responsible roles, particularly in terms of improving their behaviour and relationships with others (Rolfe, 2006). From our evidence, the challenges male leaders were concerned about was the representativeness of their own staffing not reflecting the communities they served in relation to gender. They supported male trainees (and women) in their professional training and had pointed them in the right directions whilst being at their schools. The trainees themselves would take on a leadership role in EY in the first few years of their teaching career if there was strong leadership support to overcome stereotype views. Male trainees also felt the issue of identity was not as prominent where there were male models present. Best practice in the EY had more emphasis on leadership and management, especially in the final year of training, and also in the final teaching placement whereby students were teaching for up to 80 per cent of their allocated time. This has led to EY practitioners being better prepared for the variety of leadership roles. However, there is no doubt that the challenge of effective leadership and appropriate training for the leadership role is an increasingly important element in providing high quality provision for Early Years.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank their respective universities for their support. They would also like to thank all the final year male BEd teacher trainee students from the University of Bedfordshire (2011–2012 cohort) and the male senior leaders from primary schools for their valuable thoughts and comments.

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