

# Gender differences in early years sector



## Chapter 3 – Literature Review

### Introduction:

The aim for this literature review is to examine the literature on the selected topic of men working in the early years sector and to the objectives of this research by acquire knowledge, through familiarising myself with the literature on the area. The objectives of this research are, to critically analyse the literature on Gender balanced workforce within in the early year's sector. To explore what are the benefits to children of a more gender balanced childcare service and to identify are there any disadvantages? To identify practitioner's views on why men in Ireland are not choosing to work in the early year's sector and to identify practitioner's views on how to encourage men into the childcare sector and finally to explore issues parents may have, if any on men working in the early year's sector.

### Background:

For many decades there has been a division of gender within the labour force. Commonly with men found in well paid occupations that are, highly skilled and that involve heavy work such as the construction or transport industries with female workers, on the other hand, have been found in caring nurturing occupations such as childcare, nursing or social work (Garrett, 1987). At present men are a very small percentage of the early year's workforce in Ireland. Sources of data on the early years workforce show that men are at around 1 percent of the early year's workforce in Ireland. Considering the huge changes in Ireland over the last decade it is surprising that this figure hasn't really changed over the last ten years. So it isn't

surprising that also at present men are a small percentage of the childcare trainees in Ireland. Data gathered from research in other European countries shows some differences but men are usually well below 5 per cent of the early years workforce (see Cameron et al, 2003). This data from Europe also shows that Denmark has the highest proportion in Europe of male childcare workers, in Denmark men are 8% of the early year's workforce.

#### Benefits of a more gender balanced childcare workforce:

The early years sector is not only a big employer in its own right but the early years sector is essential to enabling parents especially mothers to take up employment in the workforce. The childcare sector is, therefore, important to the achievement of gender equality in the workforce of Ireland. Increased participation of mothers in the labour market reduces child poverty and improves educational outcomes for children (see Penn et al, 2004). An important element of early years care and education is to promote inclusion and valuing diversity a more gender balanced workforce contests stereotypes and shows gender equality to young children. In this way, it is seen to enrich the quality of childcare (see Cameron et al, 1999; Moss, 2000). It is expected that in practice males will bring diverse skills to the workforce, reflecting on their own gendered rearing. (Jensen, 1996) argues that the quality of childcare is improved for children because it exposes them to diverse styles of playing, caring and instructing. The literature frequently states that such diversity enriches the range of children's experiences while attending an early years' service. It is proposed that children can benefit from seeing a male in a caring, nurturing and responsible role, particularly in terms of their relationships with others, behaviours and attitudes. (Daycare

Trust, 2002), Furthermore Miller (1986) draws our attention to the fact that a conflict of identity can be experienced by both male and female teachers; between teachers' roles as 'nurturers' and 'carers' on one hand, and on the other hand their professional role as educators (as cited in Drudy, Martin, Woods & O' Flynn, 2005, p. 23).

The literature suggests that male childcare practitioners can be positive male role models for children these benefits are mostly spoken about in relation to the benefits for children of lone mothers as cited in Cameron, 2001, (Jensen, 1996) suggested that 'the presence of male childcare workers could go some way towards providing constant, positive male role models for these children, as some kind of compensation for what is missing at home' this is disputed by Christie (1998) as cited in Cameron, 2001 p. 435 Christie argues that 'this model does not explain how, why, or for whom, male workers are expected to compensate, or whether compensation is possible'. Christie goes on to state, it may be wrong to assume that a child lacks a 'father figure' or other type of role model simply because they do not live with their father. And that it may not be realistic to expect a male worker to fulfil this role when such expectations are not placed on female childcare workers. Furthermore Owen (2003) states, it is unclear whether males provide role models for children by being as he say 'traditional' males in a female environment, Owen questions is it by engaging in so called 'male' play activities such as sport, or by challenging stereotypes by taking on a more traditionally 'feminine' caring and nurturing role. Further evidence to support such claims is provided by Bricheno and Thornton (2007) who found no indication that children even saw their teachers

whether they are male or female as role models (p. 394). Even though the concept of men in childcare being role models may be weak, it is supported by parents, early years employers, and the general public (Daycare Trust, 2002).

Every child is unique in their own individual way and has specific individual needs that need to be met in a responsive and appropriate manner by those who are caring for them. Children who are been cared for by Early Childhood Practitioners on a full-time basis within a pre-school setting are in their care for more than eight hours a day, therefore it is extremely important for Child care practitioners to meet their physical and emotional needs all the time in order to form close emotional bonds with children. According to Roberts (2010), childcare practitioners learn to recognize children's emotional and physical cues and respond to them promptly and appropriately. By doing this she believed that practitioners allow for close emotional relationships to blossom (Roberts, 2010). As a result of these emotional relationships, Roberts (2010) also believed that they pave the way for children to develop healthily. This idea is highlighted by Benson et al (2009), who state that one of the most important contributors to healthy development is children developing close emotional relationships with a responsive and nurturing caregiver. Nowhere in this literature is it stated that gender affects the ability to care for a child.

#### Barriers to men working in the early year's sector:

The literature suggests that main barrier to men working in the early year's sector is the fact that there is such a low rate of pay and that childcare

practitioners level of qualifications are not represented in their rate of pay as cited by RTE News online (18/2/2015), The association of childhood professionals said that over 25, 000 people are working in the early years sector where the typical income is less than €11 an hour. Marian Quinn the associations chairperson stated that the situation is unsustainable because young people are choosing better paying careers instead of the early years. Furthermore the Irish Examiner (3/1/2015) argued that Representative bodies have been flooded with accounts of workers, qualified to degree level and with many years of experience, earning just €18, 000 per annum. For a male who is the bread winner of a family this would not be sustainable Research by the Daycare Trust (2003) stated that nearly half of over 2000 adults that were interviewed said that better wages would encourage more males to work in the early years sector. Not surprisingly (Drudy, Martin, Woods et al., 2005,) found that In an Irish study of school-leavers and student teachers ‘ low pay” was given as a primary reason for fewer males in primary teaching.

Another prominent barrier to the lack of males working in the early years sector is the it is a female dominated sector and the notion that it is women’s work, it is easy to understand that being in a minority may be an uncomfortable experience, and data suggests that this could be one of the key issues discouraging men from working in the early years sector. Historically, early childhood education has been seen as synonymous with caring for and nurturing young children and, consequently, continues to be widely regarded as ‘ women’s work’ (Murray, 1996, p. 368). Furthermore Daycare Trust (1999) posits that “ Childcare staffs are overwhelmingly

women and are strikingly badly paid compared with other caring professionals despite the commitment and professionalism which exists within the industry. Staffs have poor conditions of work and do long hours with little access to training or support. Morale can be low and the best often leave for better prospects elsewhere.” Interestingly Cameron (2001) acknowledges and asserts that if early childhood work was re-examined, with ‘ higher professional status and a higher rate of pay, it could be expected that there would be more male employees, fewer men in the token, isolated situation, and possibly less reason to move on quickly’ (p. 444). Many Childcare positions are part-time and this also causes a barrier to males seeking employment in the early year’s sector. At the same time, the availability of part-time employment in the sector suits many women in the sector, a number of who work in childcare while their children are young. This motivation has been found to be particularly strong among childminders, who work on a self-employed basis (see Mooney et al, 2001a&b). The high proportion of part-time jobs in the sector is thought to deter men and that they are more likely to seek full-time employment. According to Cameron, (2004). it is also evident that the men that do work in the early year’s sector are more likely to be found holding positions with older children in positions such as after school care rather than working with babies and younger children, This has been explained with reference to men’s preference for working with older children and choosing roles in education more so than caring roles.

What needs to be done to increase the numbers of men working in the early year’s sector?

As cited by Fine-Davis, et al (2005) highlights that there has been extensive backing for men to consider childcare as a career this was made clear by the European Commission (1992) which called on Member States to encourage and support increased participation by men in the care and upbringing of children. This theme was again encouraged in the White Paper on European Social Policy, A Way Forward for the Union (European Commission, 1994), and by the European Commission Network on Childcare (1990). It was found that despite the unquestionable support for increasing the number of men working in the childcare sector, the recruitment of men into the childcare field has not gained momentum. It has been suggested that particular attention should be focused on recruiting men into this area of childcare but as discussed earlier the barriers such as rate of pay, the lack of professional status associated with the profession and the current lack of males currently employed within the sector are barriers that need to be overcome before the possibility of men entering the early years workforce. Cameron, (1997) states that

“ It would appear from the example of Danish childcare centres that where the work has been re-evaluated as valuable, and as appropriate for a mixed-gender workforce, the perception of ‘ mothering and childcare equals low value work’ no longer holds as a principal motivation for employment in childcare work” (1997a: 64-65).

Fine-Davis, et al (2005), also suggests that it is evident that males will not be attracted to the field unless the salaries increase. At present Irish parents are paying some of the highest childcare fees in Europe, this isn't because Ireland has the most costly childcare in Europe, but because the Irish



government invests such a small percentage of GDP. Research also found that many early years' employers acknowledge that the barriers to recruiting men into the early years sector are significant but they do not see that it is their duty to encourage men into the early year's sector, but that responsibility lies with the Government, that the government needs to encourage this through advertising or through services such as careers education and guidance (see Rolfe et al., 2003). As cited by RTE News online (2015) Professor Noirin Hayes stated that the current investment in childcare of 0.1% of GDP compared to our European counterpart's investment of 0.7% is not appropriate, adding childcare was not a business but a social service and that needs to be recognised. Furthermore to this as cited by the Irish Times (2015) Chief executive of Early Childhood Ireland, Teresa Heeney, said crèche workers that are qualified to degree level 7 or level 8 with many years of valuable experience are being paid as little as €18,000 per year. Furthermore the Irish times also cited Marian Quinn (Chairperson of the Association of Childhood Professionals) she said, "We are losing many qualified, and skilled experienced and knowledgeable people who can't afford to remain in the profession of childcare. Things need to change on a government level for it to have any impact on the barriers to men working in the childcare sector.

"Equal opportunity needs to be a two-way process, as women move into male dominated areas and are encouraged to aspire to management positions, men should be encouraged into childcare and education, so that male participation becomes the norm rather than the exception." (Thurtle et al, 1998: 632)

Parents views of a more gender balanced early year's sector:

The literature suggests that parents recognise the benefits of a more gender balanced early year's work force as cited by Cameron et al, (1999) some parents believed men and women had different skills in childcare, with men more able to engage in physical and fun activities, and women seen as more skilled in caring, nurturing and planning. But unfortunately the stigma of it being women's work and the pre-conceptions that it is not a role suited to males still prevails. Even though parents and the general public mostly support the employment of more males in the early years sector, mainly on the grounds that males provide positive role models, there is also an element of concern identified through research from parents, college lecturers and the general public about the possible abuse from male practitioners (Thurtle and Jennings, 1998; Cameron et al., 1999). Penn and McQuail, 1997concur with this stating that the topic of sexual abuse is undoubtedly a most important issue discouraging men from seeking employment in the early years sector. Male practitioners working with young children have reported being probed on their motives, and mistrusted of having perverse sexual intentions but there is no research out there that support any of these concerns and furthermore research by the Daycare Trust (2003) found that, although 77 per cent of participants, who included parents of children attending early years services, were in favour of more males working in the sector, 57 per cent said that one of the key barriers to men's employment was the risk of paedophiles working with children' and 56 per cent agreed that ' people could be suspicious of a man working in childcare' Owen, 2003 argues that this is somewhat unexpected given that

cases of sexual abuse in early years sector are exceptionally rare, and that they do not all involve men.

### Conclusion:

In concluding this literature review on men working in the early years sector it is evident through the literature that there are strong beliefs in the benefits of a more gender balanced early years workforce for the children and the workforce of the sector. Majority of the literature on the topic of men working in the early year's sector seemed to focus on the range of perceived benefits, with particular focus on the benefits to children that attend early year's services, but there was also a small focus on the benefits to the workforce and for the men that work in the sector. As cited by Scott and colleagues, research in the area of employment in the early year's sector has focused more on the role of the sector in enabling women to participate in paid employment (Scott et al, 2000). The literature on the barriers to men working in the early years sector was also examined here we found how pay and the lack of professional status were the main barriers to men working in the early years sector. Following this we explored the strategies that were researched on ways to encourage men to see the early year's sector as a viable career prospect it was discussed that more would have to be done on a government level for any changes to be prompted. Finally the area of the views of parents was explored in this section it came to light that parents did see the benefits to a more gender balanced early year's workforce but that some parents still had concerns when it came to the safety of their children.

It also became very clear throughout the process of this literature review that because of the small percentage of men employed in the early years and the fact that there are very few examples of a mixed-gender workforce, these have not been examined empirically. The researcher was unable to source studies which explored the benefits of a mixed gender workforce through empirical research. Rather, the benefits identified are largely indicative and based on anecdotal evidence. The researcher also noted a lack of research or studies carried out on this area in Ireland. Thus forming an important research agenda for the future, it suggests a need for focused research on mixed gender workforces in childcare, to more accurately identify the benefits to children, parents and the workforce in Ireland.