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Career trajectories of male early childhood workers in Ireland

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Abstract

It is estimated that 2% of early childhood Educators, working directly with children in Ireland are male, increasing to 3% when ancillary staff are included (Pobal, 2016). This research aimed to compare the career trajectories of male and female early childhood educators in Ireland by exploring the factors which influence their entry to the sector, their experiences, and the trajectories their careers take once there. The research draws on literature on gendered nature of the early childhood workforce (Cameron et al, 1999, Brind et al 2011, Conroy, 2012, Brody, 2014, Rohrmann, 2015). Within this research, gender is considered as constructed and embedded in social structures.

This research is the first phase of a cross sectional mixed methods design. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with men and women on their routes into early childhood, experiences of being early childhood workers and roles within the sector. Ethical clearance was sought through UCL Institute of Education as part of the doctoral research programme. Findings illustrate men and women's entry routes, experiences and trajectories in the early childhood workforce in Ireland.

Findings will be discussed in the context of implications for recruitment and retention of male staff in early childhood settings in the changing landscape of the early childhood sector in Ireland.

Keywords

gender balance, men in early childhood, gender in early childhood, early childhood workforce, career trajectories

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Career Trajectories of Male Early Childhood Workers in Ireland

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Introduction - Early Childhood Context Ireland

- ▶ Split System: Private and Community
- ▶ Subject of recent government investment (DCYA, 2009, 2014, 2016)
- ▶ Heavily regulated & inspected (Child Care Act, 1991; Pre-School Regulations, 2016)
- ▶ Introduction of minimum qualification 2016 (DCYA, 2016)
- ▶ 2% of workers are male (Pobal, 2016)
- ▶ Limited Irish research (Harte, 2010; King, 2014)

Gender in the ECEC workforce -key themes

- ▶ Role modelling (Brown, 2004; Brownhill, 2014, 2015)
- ▶ Pedagogy and practice (Besnard and Dirren, 2010, Gulbrandsen, 2012; Perkins, 2013; Brandes et al, 2015)
- ▶ Equality (Cameron, 2001)
- ▶ Gendered roles and expectations (Cameron et al, 1999; Cremers et al, 2010; Peeters, Rohmann and Emilsen, 2015)
- ▶ Pay and conditions (Walshe, 2012)
- ▶ Advanced Progression 'glass elevator' (Williams, 1992, Cameron, 2001)
- ▶ Risk (Besnard and Dirren, 2010; Woltring, 2012)

Current study

- ▶ **Doctoral Research Questions:**
 - ▶ **Entry: What leads men to enter the early childhood sector?**
 - ▶ What are the factors that influence them (experiences, advice etc.)?
 - ▶ What are the hindrances/barriers (demand, perceptions)?
 - ▶ **Trajectories: What path do their careers take?**
 - ▶ Where do they go when they enter (experiences)?
 - ▶ Do their trajectories differ from women's?
- ▶ **Three phases:**
 - ▶ Phase 1: Interviews with male and female ECEC workers
 - ▶ Phase 2: Focus group with careers guidance teachers in secondary school
 - ▶ Phase 3: Parent survey

Phase 1: Methods and Participants

- ▶ Interviews carried out with 7 male participants + 3 female participants during July and August 2017.
- ▶ Further interviews are scheduled for September 2017
- ▶ Male and female participants were matched by service type
- ▶ All but one participant are currently working in the sector.
- ▶ Four of the male participants were in some kind of supervisory/management role
- ▶ One of the three female participants was in a supervisory role
- ▶ Participants came from a range of services across the country and men self-selected based on a call for participants through various early childhood organisations

Phase 1: Preliminary findings (male interviews)

▶ Entry:

“Armed with naivety” (Joshua)

▶ Routes:

- ▶ Second chance career (6 Men)
- ▶ 1st choice for just one male

“It couldn't be more 'fall in to...I was presented 1, 2 or 3" (James)

▶ Guidance:

- ▶ No careers guidance from school
- ▶ Late stage recommendations from family or welfare officer (on foot of an expressed interest)

← **Reactions from family & friends:**

- ← Generally positive
- ← Source of “banter”
- ← Female friends and parents were more understanding

← **Recruitment:**

- ← All men expressed that they felt their gender led to favourable treatment in recruitment

▶ **Practice**

“Incorporating humour” (Robert)

- ▶ Expectations of care the same but some differences in how that was expressed

“Just enough care that they know you’re there” (Joshua)

- ▶ Some differences expressed in outdoor or rough and tumble play and humour
- ▶ All expressed differences in expectations around other tasks (such as DIY) though some did suggest that their previous background may have an influence.
- ▶ Two participants suggested that he is seen as the “disciplinarian” with both children and parents despite being a junior member of staff while another felt he was often given responsibilities for children with behaviours that challenge.

▶ **Working in teams:**

- ▶ Two suggested that there was a difference between men and women's communication in teams (2)
- ▶ But others suggested that it was down to individual differences rather than gender differences
- ▶ Staff room conversations were often dominated by "female" type subjects, though most men, did not express it as an issue.
- ▶ Three of the men have worked with other men in at least one of their services

▶ **Children and parents responses:**

- ▶ All had positive responses from children
- ▶ Five of the men had one story of an instance of a parent's objection to his presence, particularly around intimate care and toileting. One man had two experiences.
- ▶ In all cases, once the parent got to know the worker and see the relationship between the worker and the child, their concerns were resolved.
- ▶ The responses of management to objections.
- ▶ Two of the participants suggested cultural or generational elements to the concerns (which links to changing attitudes and family roles)

Summary

- ▶ In terms of **pedagogy and practice**, there appears to be some difference between the practices of men and women interviewed - in some cases along gendered lines
- ▶ Where **gender differences** became apparent was in the other interactions between male and female staff in settings, such as **communication style**, expression of conversation **topics being “male” or “female”** in nature and of the **DIY type jobs** that the male workers are routinely expected to carry out or have a knowledge of and **dealing with parents**
- ▶ **Role modelling** was an important factor for most participants, not necessarily that children (esp boys) would see typical male behaviour but that they would have **positive experiences of men in their lives**. There was some suggestion of the child's gender influencing this.

- ◀ In terms of recruitment, progression and retention, men expressed their gender as being a **positive element of recruitment**, 4 held **supervisory roles**, one had **left**, one was **leaving** in the coming weeks and two expressed an interest in moving towards inspectorate roles and away from the floor. One of the women felt her gender was a positive factor in recruitment, one of three held a supervisory role and ...
- ◀ **Negative responses to their presence were few (though still present in five cases) and Objections came from parents or grandparents**
- ◀ Men's reasons for leaving or lack of men generally was financial indicating a return to the **traditional role of male as chief breadwinner in the home**
- ◀ **Three of the men planned on staying in their current role - all three were management**

Future directions

- ▶ Further interviews to be conducted in September 2017
- ▶ Full analysis completed
- ▶ Phase 2: Focus group with careers teachers (Nov 2017)
- ▶ Phase 3: Parent survey (Dec, 2017)

Thank you

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