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Professionalism and Masculinity in ECEC: Men's Voices from Around the World

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Abstract

Because professionalism in ECEC is measured by standards relating to caring, men in the field are often held to expectations associated with female behaviors. The aim of this research is to examine the tensions which arise from this encounter and explore alternative solutions which men ECEC workers around the world have generated in the face of their challenged masculinity.

'Performativity' in the caregiver role in the face of a cloud of suspicion is central to male caregivers' gender construction and to maintaining their masculine identity (Jones, 2007). Men in the profession incorporate their constructed masculinity as a major dimension in their professional identity as caregivers (Day & Kington, 2008). Connell (2005) asserts that masculinity is constructed through individual actions and responses of others.

This study employed video observations and narrative interviews of men in six different countries, relying on grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 2008) to thematically analyse the data. Participants granted approval for use of the data, and supervisors and parents permitted video recording of classroom activities.

Findings show multiple components of the teachers' male identities: toughness, charisma, initiative, daring, and playfulness combined with softness, attention to the children's needs, and casualness. These men challenged traditional male hegemony, supporting the model of the 'new man'. Their commitment to teaching, combined with an intense interest in children's wellbeing, enabled them to incorporate strong masculine identities with appropriate professional goals. This study suggests that early childhood leaders redefine gender roles by reconsidering the traditional gender dichotomy paradigm.

Keywords

gender identity, professional identity, masculinity, caring, playfulness

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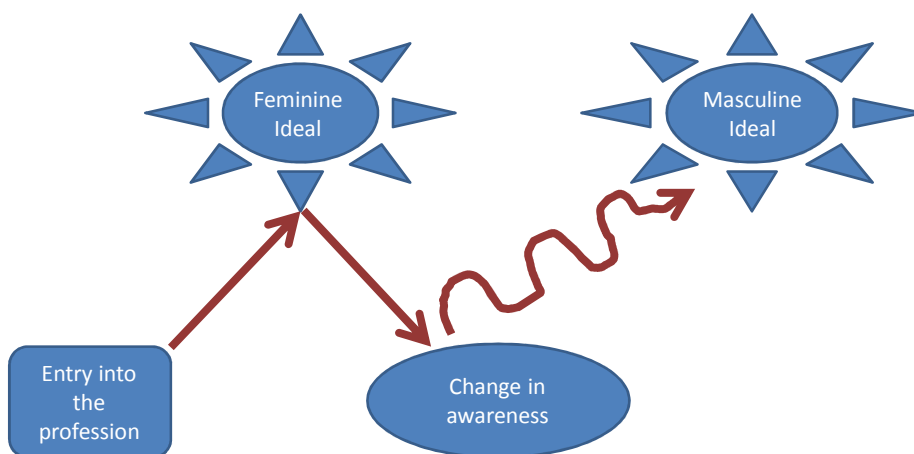
The centrality of caring and professionalism

- Caring is central to the professionalism among women, especially in 'women's work' (Noddings, 2003, 2005)
- A continuum of expressions of caring ranges from commitment and relationship at one end to cuddling and mothering at the other (Vogt, 2003).

Men and caring in ECEC

- Men ECEC workers are wary of touch (Sargeant, 2004)
- This caution leads men to seek alternative forms of caring (King, 1998) and compensatory activities (Sargeant, *ibid*)
- Men tend to reject female teaching styles and to seek a masculine discourse (Connell, 2005) to satisfy their need for an appropriate gender identity in their work.

Formation of Masculine Professional Identity in ECEC

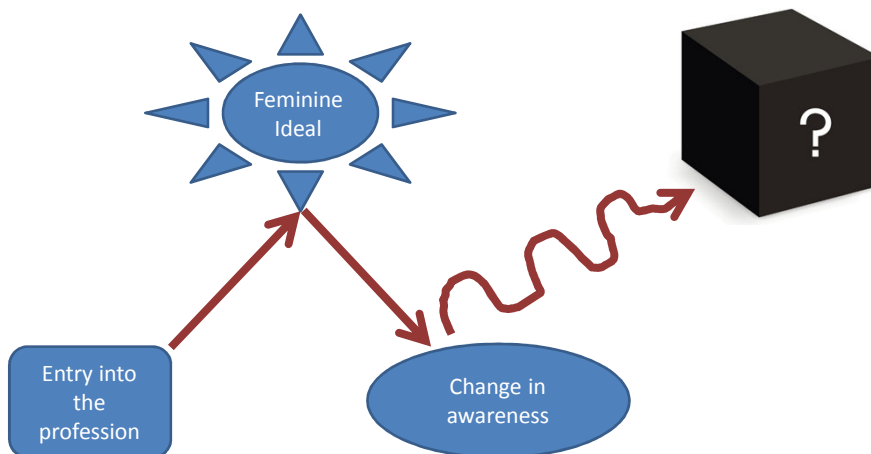


Elton's quest for a professional masculine identity

'She wore a linen skirt which never got dirty even though she did messy art projects with the children, and she was very "motherly".'

As a male you probably bring into the classroom and into the program unique traits, and I don't know if that has to do with demeanor (or) if it has to do with the way you talk, the words you choose.

What characterizes a Masculine Professional Identity in ECEC



Research aims

- How do male ECEC workers relate to caring in their practice?
- How do they relate to physical touch and affection?
- How is the professionalism of male ECEC workers affected by the cloud of suspicion which surrounds their work?
- How do these men understand their own professionalism?

Qualitative methods

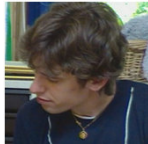
Multiple case study data collection



- Non-participant observation – one complete day of work, backed up with video and photos
- Narrative interview – 2 to 3 hours, followed by a semi-structured interview
- Interviews with work supervisors, and gender balance experts within the cultural context.

Population

- 6 men from different cultures:
Norway, the Netherlands, UK, Switzerland,
Israel, and the USA
- Veteran teachers 5– 27 years of experience
- 2 nursery caregivers; 4 kindergarten teachers
- 2 married, 2 in long term heterosexual
relationships, 2 'bachelors'



Analysis of data

- Identification of themes in the data sets
- Thick description of the classroom practice,
and profile of personal background
- Comparison of cases, emphasis on
commonalities and differences

Active involvement of participants in the research process

- Identification of themes in the data sets
- Thick description of the classroom practice, and profile of personal background
- **Submission of the case study to the participant for comments**
- **Revision and resubmission to the participant**
- **Consensus between researcher and participant**
- Comparison of cases, emphasis on commonalities and differences

Findings: Personal ethos of caring

What they **do**:

- Focus on relationships with children (Levien, the Netherlands)
- Emphasis on the needs of the child rather than the mandates of the curriculum (Elton, USA)
- Awareness and immediate response to children (Reidar, Norway)
- Genuine interest in the child's work (Benny, Switzerland)
- Intense eye contact (Elton, USA)

Personal ethos of caring

What they **say**:

- “I guess I consider myself nurturing, but just not very motherly. My styling here is pretty direct.” (Elton, USA)
- “I believe in the importance of forging a really strong connection with the child. I try to enter into their world.” (Leon, UK)

Touch

- Immunity to fear of touching
- With the toddlers: touching, hugging, holding, and speaking gently
- Gentle encompassing
- Resilience – enabled use of touch despite suspicions surrounding them



Attitudes towards work

Expressions of pleasure and satisfaction from their work with young children.

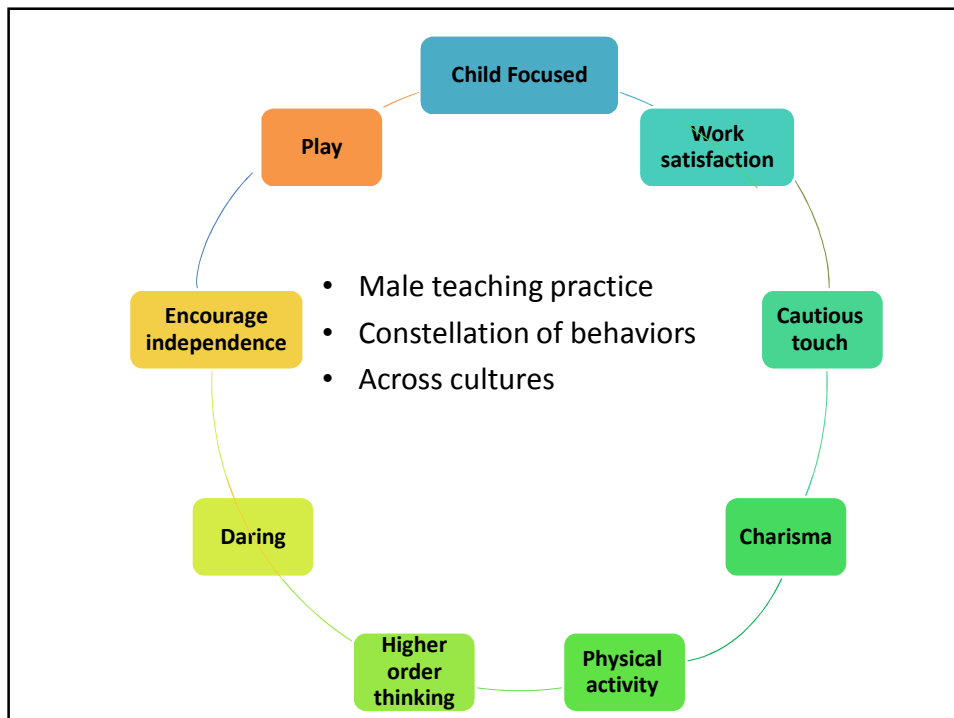
- "On my morning bus ride I think how happy I am to be going to work in a profession I love." - Reidar, Oslo
- Involvement throughout the day (Leon, UK)
- Non stop interaction except for allotted breaks (Levien, the Netherlands)
- Intense energy (Eli, Israel)

The Importance of Play

"Playing with the children was an important part of the day. The teachers play not only because they know that this is how the children learn, but also because they enjoy playing. Their eyes glimmer when they stretch out on the floor to join in a construction project (Levien) or toss a ball in an unexpected direction for the toddler to retrieve (Reidar). Jointly with the children they explored the wonders of water, trying out different ways of pouring and seeing what happens (Leon), worked together on a Lego construction (Benny) or played a card game (Eli) at a table, *all engaging with the children as equals.*" (Brody, 2014)

Styles of interaction

- child-centeredness,
- charisma,
- promoting thinking
- emphasis on physical activity
- Encouragement of daring acts of physical prowess
- Encouraging independence – shrinking their own power and influence to make room for the child's decisions



Conclusions

- Compensatory behaviors, such as enthusiasm, daring, charisma may take the place of unfettered touching
- As veteran teachers these men showed a high degree of resilience to threats, criticism, fears, and suspicions

“Caring comes naturally to women, and has to be learned by men with great effort.” (Leon, London)

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Thanks for your attention

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