

Perkins, Helen; Edwards, Tracey; O'Sullivan, June; Corlett, Nick & Parry-Norman, Lukas (2019).

**Men in childcare: What do the children think? - A joint project between the London Early Years Foundation (LEYF) and the University of Wolverhampton.** Paper presented on the 29<sup>th</sup> EECERA Annual Conference, 23.8.2019, Thessaloniki, Greece.

***Abstract***

This paper draws on children's and teachers' experiences of men in childcare, reflecting on how gendered pedagogies in ECEC practice may limit children's perceptions of self. We set out to explore what the children think about their practitioners and how this may impact constructions of gender roles. Based on the previous research by June O'Sullivan (MBE) and Sue Chambers (2012) which found that children do not differentiate between staff members based on gender when selecting activities, with the exception of literacy, in which boys participated, but chose female practitioners for this activity. This research is mainly qualitative and based within a socio-cultural perspective. A praxeological approach is used, positioning teachers as researchers (Pascal and Bertram, 2012). Photographs of familiar staff (male and female) were used with children to provoke dialogue around gender stereotypical activities. Data were collected through interviews with children and a focus group with the teacher-researchers. Children's rights are attended to by teacher-researchers noticing and valuing children and their potential contribution to research, and ensuring that children have information and a choice about participation, including the right not to participate. Findings suggest that children need to see their diverse society reflected in their nurseries. Teachers who provide a rich, gender neutral learning environment, allows children to embrace positive, non-stereotypical gendered behaviours. Good practice is seen where teachers (male and female) act consciously to avoid perpetuating gender stereotypical behaviours. ECEC professionals should be aware of how their own values and beliefs may influence children's understanding of gender.

***Keywords***

men in childcare, gender, pedagogy, practice-based inquiry, praxeology

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## Context



- This is a joint research project between London Early Years Foundation (LEYF) and the University of Wolverhampton.
- 
- LEYF is one of the UK's leading childcare charitable social enterprises. It offers high quality, education and care in 39 Ofsted-registered nurseries offering places for 4500+ children in 11 London Boroughs.
- 
- It is committed to excellence in Early Years education, training and research.
- The organisation was instrumental in the Men in Childcare movement and is committed to increasing the number of male practitioners and teachers working in Early Years. This is one of the main drivers for continuing the research in this area.

## Stage One Findings



- London Early Years Foundation(LEYF), Stage one research highlighted the influence society plays in the attitude towards male practitioners in childcare.
- Findings concluded that attitudes to men working with children could be changed. There were some gendered patterns in that
- '*girls playing with dolls chose female practitioners.*'
- Other findings however identified literacy; stories and singing were only associated with female staff.

## Purpose of Stage Two



- The previous research reported that children did not differentiate between staff members based on gender when selecting activities. That is however with the exception of literacy. In this case the boys participated in the activities but chose female practitioners. This warranted further investigation.
- The training developed by LEYF to respond to this was designed to increase the children's engagement with male practitioners during story and singing activities.



## Research Questions



- How do children perceive male practitioners?
- How do children characterise their relationship with the male practitioners ?
- Do children consistently choose staff they like for the activities they do well rather than the associate gender connection. ( For example choosing a woman to play football because she is really good rather than a man)?

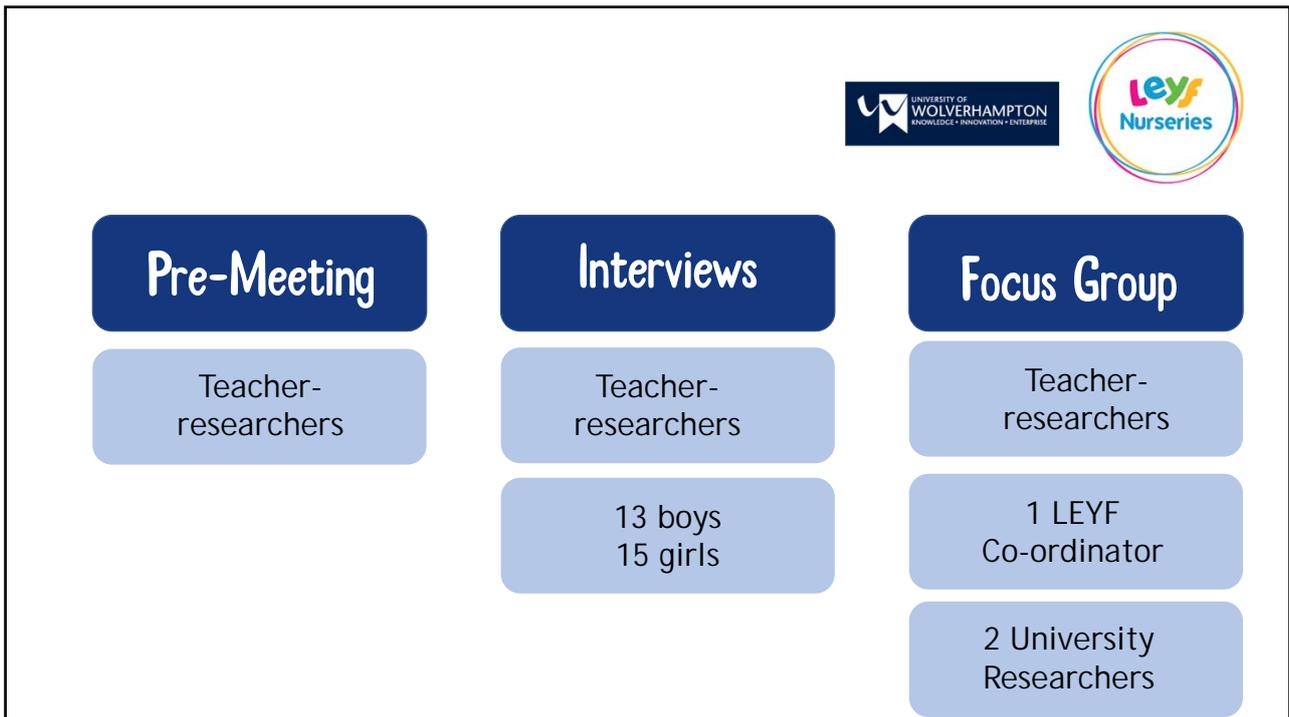
## Research Paradigm



This research is mainly qualitative and based on a sociocultural perspective. The methods are participatory and are based on praxeological values by involving teachers as research partners.

Researching in this way provides an opportunity for transformation as the teacher-researchers have shared ownership of research and its outcomes.

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# Data Analysis



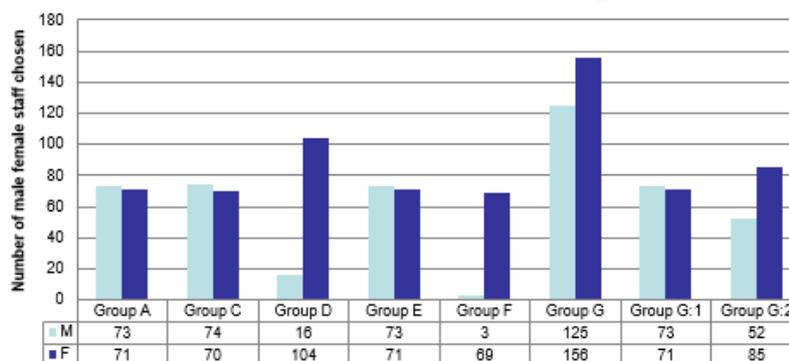
- Discourse and thematic analysis, grounded in a social constructivist and socio-cultural approach.
- Key analytics are interactions, choice and reason.
- Transcripts were analysed in terms of how concepts of gender stereotypes affect how and why children make choices in terms of gender and activity.
- The children's data is enhanced through the focus group discussion with the teacher-researchers.

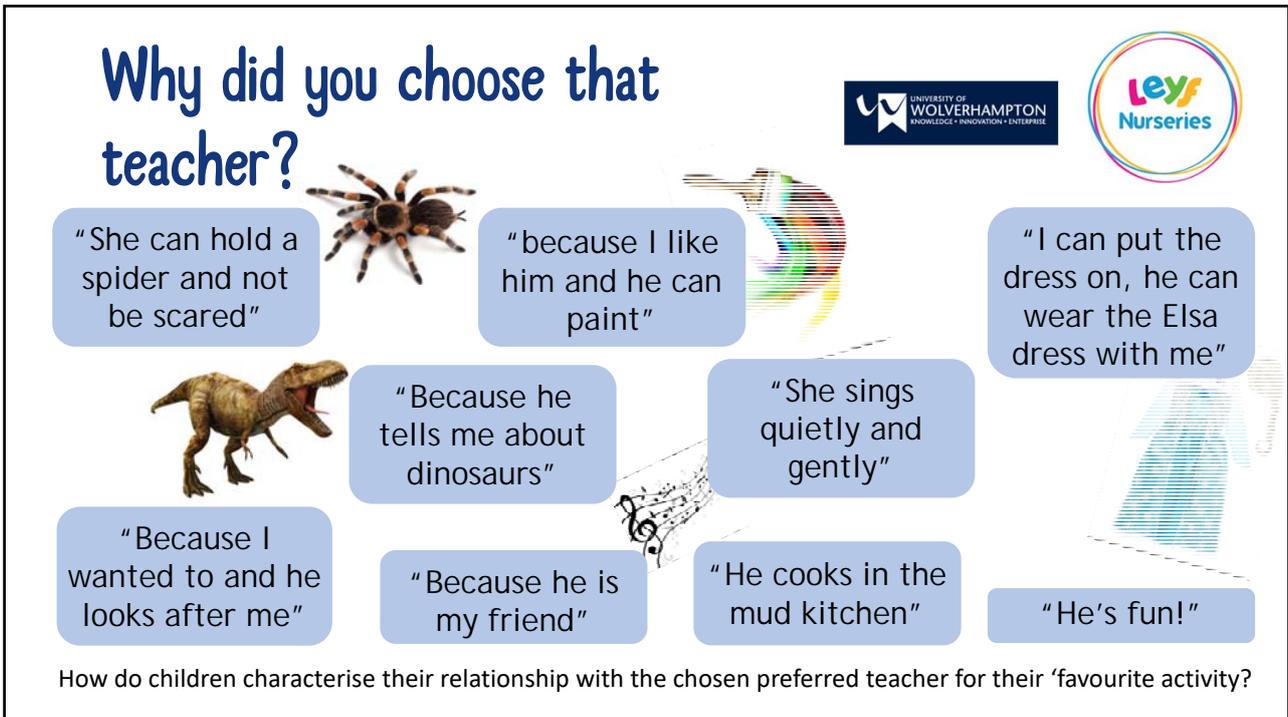
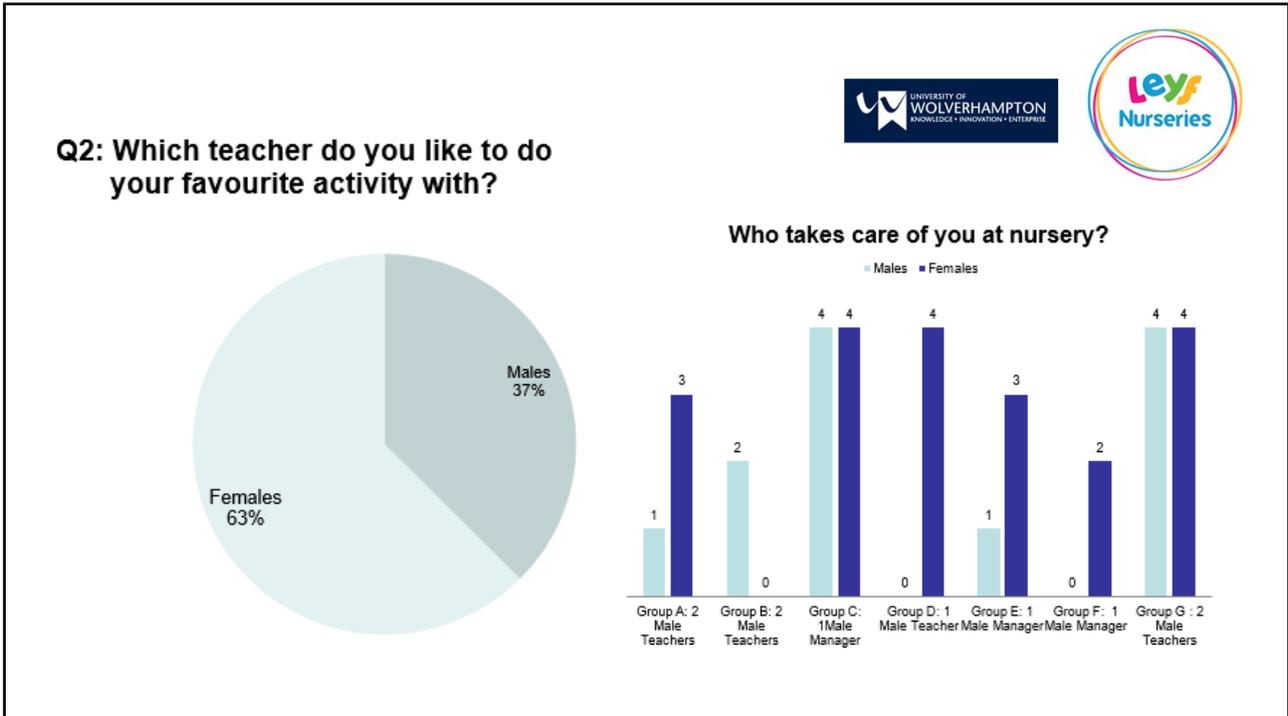
*.... culture spreads like the surface of a body of water, spreading towards available spaces or trickling downwards towards new spaces through fissures and gaps, eroding what is in its way. The surface can be interrupted and moved, but these disturbances leave no trace, as the water is charged with pressure and potential to always seek its equilibrium, and thereby establish smooth space.”\* (Deleuze and Guattari, 1980)*

# How do children perceive male practitioners?



**Choices of activities and Teachers gender**





## Literacy



45 different titles of stories and books were chosen by children of which 8 were chosen by both boys and girls



30 titles chosen for female teachers to read

25 titles chosen for male teachers to read

Read to children by both male and female teachers.

- Zog and the flying Drs
- Red Riding Hood
- Snail and the Whale
- Max the Brave
- Alan's Scary Teeth
- Dinosaur ones
- Handa's Hen
- The Queen's Knickers

## Good storytelling and links to reading and comprehension



Story telling and story sharing; with and without books

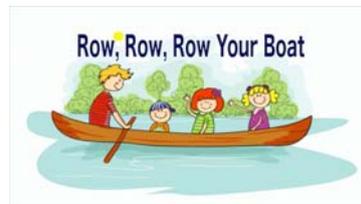


Gleason (1975) and Bernstein-Ratner (1988) reported that fathers used more complex language than mothers when interacting with their children (cited in Duursma 2014).

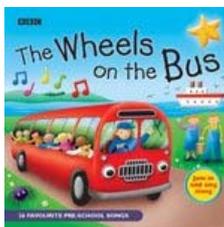
*The supportive adult, who shows him what a book is and how print works, who helps him to discover reading and expects him to be successful makes all the difference. Together, **adult and child** learn about reading' (Meek, 1982, p 31)*

Where there are three males, children chose the female member of staff 'because she does the voices and is really animated and doesn't mind making a fool of herself-she really brings it to life'

## Good storytelling and links to reading and comprehension



The ninjago song



Helicopters don't fly.

## Behaviours



- Girls like rough and tumble/ risky play activities.
- In female only settings, boys and girls named teachers who engaged in this type of play
- Where there are proactive male teachers, children chose equally between male and female teachers to play with.
- In some settings girls favoured male teachers more than boys for their favourite activity.
- Some practices unconsciously allow/reinforce gender stereotypical behaviours.

*'he throws them up in the air'*

*'when we have more boys we have more rough and tumble play'*

## BLACK GREY WHITE



- Challenges of the binary:
- Biological vs Social Construct (Butler, 2006)
- Behaviours not beliefs predict children's attitude to gender equality
- Attributions and characteristics belong to people not genders
- they need to be evident in both sexes - need a balance

## Good examples in LEYF



- Male and female teachers join in dressing up
- Male and female teachers read with and to children
- Male and female teachers sing with and to children
- It's part of the LEYF pedagogy, to have the sofa and to have snuggle time

our boys do dress up... For them it's the '*visualness*' of it, if they see it every day (drag queen). Parents are often ones that don't like it. Children see me in a big hat and high heels, it's the normality of it.... just because he's an a dress doesn't mean he's being a princess

## What matters to children...



- Children operate in the here and now: Their interests were '*what is happening now*'
- Experts
- What matters to them is, who is 'good' at that particular activity
- Relationships
- Behaviours not beliefs

## Next Steps...



- Review and share the practice of those settings demonstrating a balance of non-gendered choices.
- Observation: Is there a difference in the language used between M & F teachers?
- How is story time structured (the battle with boys)?
- Snuggle time -is this happening in all settings and with male and female teachers?
- Where there is only one male, ensure he is seen engaging in all aspects of practice, not just as a 'novelty event'?
- Are teachers unconsciously coding activities as male or female?
- Are teachers' personal values and beliefs unconsciously impact behaviours?
- Parents perceptions?

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