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The men who are here, want to be here: Male educator perspectives in ECE

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Abstract

This research is generating the evidence-based approach to improving the recruitment and retention of male educators in a large ECEC organisation. Despite evidence on the benefits of gender equity, males continue to be a marginalised minority in ECEC settings. While low pay and concerns about physical touch are barriers to male participation (Cooney & Bittner, 2001), research in this area is limited.

Policy and practice do however determine organisational climate and the subsequent turnover rates for groups within the workforce (Litwin and Stringer, 1968, Schneider, 2008, Gupta 2008). As a framework, the features of organisational climate are useful in structuring research and its translation to approaches that support the recruitment and retention of male educators. Higher numbers of educators demanded by National Quality Framework ratios in Australia mean maximising the pool of potential educators is now urgent.

The study used a pragmatic, mixed methods approach. A survey was completed by 31% of male educators within Australia's largest ECEC organisation, followed by regional focus groups with male educators. Participation in the anonymous survey and focus groups was voluntary. The results indicate that settings that champion the contribution made by male educators to children's lives have significantly better organisational climate than those that don't.

The implications of this research are in informing new approaches to the recruitment and retention of male educators that includes a focus on the domains of organisational climate, policy implementation and the better advocacy about the beneficial role male educators play in the lives of children.

Keywords

men, equity, retention, recruitment, quality

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'The men who are here, want to be here':

Male educator perspectives in Early Childhood Education

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goodstart
early
learning

645
early learning centres

69,600
children

58,500
families

13,400
employees

\$1 billion
turnover



Our Purpose

To ensure children have the learning, development and wellbeing outcomes they need for school and life.



Why?

- A stable male role model in the early years can assist in forming healthy gender identity for both boys and girls
- Men can bring about a greater balance to the program for young children and to the dynamics of the team of educators at a centre.
- Professionalisation of early learning and child care has increased demand for skilled and qualified staff (Koch and Farquar 2015)
- One of the ways the NQF improves quality in children's education and care services is through educator to child ratios.

The Issue

- One in five early childhood educators and degree qualified teachers in a national survey said they planned to leave their job within a year because of 'low pay, feeling undervalued and increasing time spent on paperwork' (Irvine et al 2016).
- The correlation between negative organisational climate and an individual's intention acts as a proxy indicator for staff turnover (Hong & Kaur 2008).
- While low pay and concerns about physical touch are barriers to male participation (Cooney & Bittner, 2001), male educators will additionally experience marginalisation under the feminine 'gender regime' of contemporary ECEC (Connell in Peeters et al 2015).

A call to
action



Research aims

- This research is informing approaches to improving the recruitment and retention of male educators at Goodstart Early Learning.
- The research had two objectives:
 - better understanding of what male educators at Goodstart were experiencing in their work; and
 - To explore and test options for supporting male educator recruitment and retention.

Organisational Climate

- As a framework, organisational climate has been useful in structuring this research and its translation to approaches that support the recruitment and retention of male educators.
- The 'climcult' model provides 'a rich tapestry of the ways people both observe and experience their workplace in the aggregate but also identify some keys to the triggers or drivers of what people observe and experience, especially via the focus on socialisation practices and the easily transmitted myths and stories that exist in organisations' (Schneider et al 2010)

'Climcult' Model

- A global climate or culture for well-being (vision and values);
- Strategic foci with regard to policies, practices, procedures and behaviours that are rewarded, supported and expected (expectation);
- Process foci with regard to policies, practices, procedures and behaviours that get rewarded, supported and expected (follow through);
- Socialization practices by which values and beliefs for strategy and process are transmitted (strategic communications, induction, leaders 'walking the talk'); and
- The myths and stories used for transmitting those same values and beliefs (narrative).

Our male educators

- At the time of the survey, there were 335 male educators employed at Goodstart Early Learning in a workforce of 13, 400;
- 104 Men participated in the initial survey;
- 60 men participated in follow up regional focus groups in Melbourne, Adelaide, Canberra and Brisbane; and
- Individual telephone and email discussion with men unable to attend the focus groups.

Qualitative data from the survey, focus groups and interviews was analysed using a thematic approach.

Male educator perspectives



Male educators identified that throughout their careers they encounter workplace discrimination and mistrust of their motivations for working in early childhood education from both female colleagues and centre families.

- There are two primary issues that are critical ... They are trust issues from parents and co-workers and discrimination against males within the industry.... I have been subjected to both trust and discrimination issues...
- We want our fellow staff members to have our backs – its more – it's not looking at us in the same way that those disgruntled parents look at us. We want our quals to speak for themselves. We are fighting to prove ourselves every day when a new parent comes in.
- CDs may speak really inappropriately to other staff saying things like “what the hell are you doing” and nothing happens to address that approach, but if I did the same I would be accused as bullying – it's a double standard. No matter what you cop you just have to cop it.

Negative assumptions by female educators about male educator capability to deliver a professional supportive and nurturing environment for children are a point of contention for men.

- I had the experience of female educators refusing to work with me as I was male – some older women felt it should be female only. Right from the start I had challenges. I just told them it's a workplace for both sexes – I couldn't change their mind. I got my diploma and studied hard for it and so I wasn't going to let others mock this or drive me out of the profession.

- I keep trying to get a promotion and I keep trying and people just keep getting others in over the top of me...and they don't seem to be that good at their job and keep asking me for answers and how to manage things – so why are they getting the job and not me?
- I get all the “bloke” jobs – fix the door handle, unblock the toilet – happy to do it but I want to work with kids, not be a plumber. That's why [I work/go] from centre to centre.

Male educators feel they must establish their own measures to avoid further opportunities for 'mistrust'

- I refused to work at a centre that didn't have windows around the nappy changing area...
- Fortunately for me, I have not received any negative comments from parents. To be honest, [a child safety incident at a non-Goodstart centre] has heightened my fear of working in childcare. I feel increasingly anxious when left alone with the class and I'm sincerely worried about what staff and parents think of me...when my feelings were brought up with my area manager and [the] ELC, I felt like my feelings were disregarded.
- Then I came up against families - Dads asking 'why you are here? Are you changing my child? I don't want you changing my child.'

Compounding the experience of workplace discrimination is a lack of visibility of male educators at organisational level through an absence of their images in ECEC collateral and a lack of choice in uniform options for men.

- Males don't get any decent pants in the uniform range – no cargos – male lines don't exist in the Director line. Hats are for the pony tail – 38 options for women and 12 for men – and only a purple belt. And the only 'jumper' for me is a raincoat...
- Need to have male educators on the pamphlets as well as females...

A lack of male educator visibility reflects the feminine 'gendered regime'.

- Training for non-male staff in centres about working with different gendered colleagues [is needed]. For example, when I receive whole centre emails its 'Hi Ladies and [name]' instead of 'Hi Everyone' ...
- Men need to be respected and treated as men... until this year my group certificates were always sent to "Miss" or "Ms" [name] which is both ridiculous and disrespectful.
- I believe the phrase "...for a man" needs to be addressed. It is sexist and delegitimises my professionalism. I am a hardworking and skilled staff member. My gender, (while rare and a positive thing to see in the workplace) does not depreciate my quality of work.

Nevertheless, a source of strength in overcoming these challenges for male educators is the solidarity of those female co-workers and centre families they develop positive professional relationships with. This is particularly evident where Centre Directors support and promote their male educators as equal members of the centre team to the rest of the staff and to centre families.

- [There's a lot] of validation when CD backs you in front of parents – and says you are a staff member that operates the same as others in the centre – that's really nice
- Had a really good team when i started – a very good director – I felt uneasy [at first]. I wasn't sure how families or others would take it – but that passed really quickly – I've had Dads coming up and saying positive things...
- I'm permanent and love it, staff are great, my Director's great and she backs me up – every now and then I get a parent look at me strangely when they are being showed through and the CD says 'he has everything in terms of quals...'
- I [had] a couple of parents approaching me saying great to have me there and that we need more male educators as they have a great role to play.

Building trust with children has helped to progress male educator relationships with families.

- Most experiences have been pretty positive. There have been occasions of people being funny about us looking after a child as a male – the CD said ‘you just have to get used to it’ to the parents. But they do seem to see the benefits very quickly.
- The children love the concept of a male being in their room since it is a bit of a novelty. If you are male and new to the industry prepare to be smothered with attention by our young clientele.
- The children love having a male educator at the centre, and the parents seem to appreciate the diversity and contribution of a male staff member in the room.

Under these conditions, families come to appreciate the different role male educators will play in the lives of their children; and female educators acknowledge the balance male educators bring to play based learning for both male and female children.

- Everyone always comments on how 'you don't see many men in childcare' and it is unfortunate, I greatly support equal opportunities for men and women in the early learning environment and have always felt supported and valued by families, co-workers and most importantly the children throughout my 5 years with Goodstart. External and internal stakeholders always comment on my presence in the centre in a positive way.

Male educators highlighted that mentoring – not specifically male-to-male - in a supportive centre environment for new educators was a useful opportunity.

- We all collaborate together – Steve. [A new male educator] came into his room and didn't like some things so wanted to change and collaborated with other educators and came up with an idea...
- ..[my] room leader had 18 years' experience so she directed [me] in what to do and gave [me] good feedback – that really shaped the educator I am now – you really need to start with the right person – gives you good direction and good feedback...
- ...the right sort of leadership is important – doesn't necessarily have to be a male leader but just someone with the right skills. Want a leader a guider, advisor not someone who directs. You don't get many directors like that....

However, the idea of a formal men's network met with mixed reviews given the participating male educators' desire to maintain a professional outlook with their female colleagues; and, the acknowledged effort such a network would take to organise and maintain.

- I think you need to do it without making it too much about being about males – I think you need to bring the women in. You don't want women thinking it's all about men – that won't go well...
- Everyone's opinion needs to be listened too. Everyone needs to be heard
- Although there are gender politics, really it is about the leadership and culture of the centre. Networking is [better] as a mixed group but focused on professional topics...

'When I look at people in this room I see educators – not whether they are male or female – gender should not drive the outcome. If we are going to stay as equals, we then need to have an equal say. Our guidelines say we need to build good relationships and it's not negotiable and so if we go off and have our own network then how can that be building good relationships?'



Implications

- The male educator perspectives here indicate that settings that champion the contribution made by male educators to children's lives have significantly better organisational climate than those that don't.

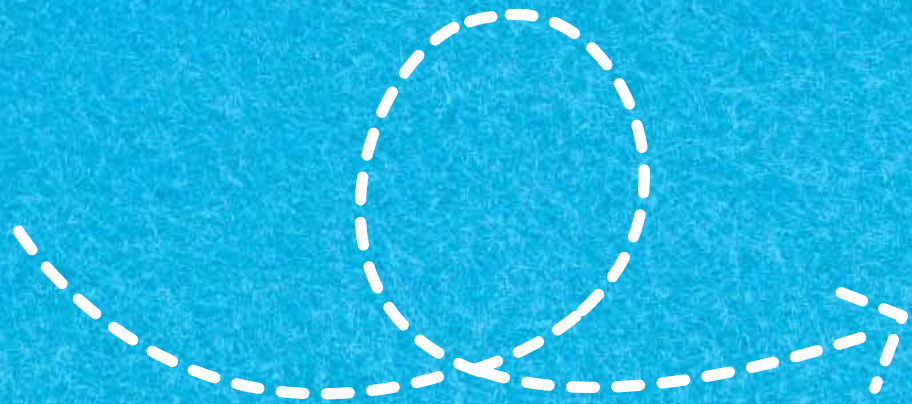


What we're working on now

- Internal advocacy for better representation and recognition
- Support for professional development & growth

Key activity

- Showcasing male educator stories and contribution to the wider community
- Providing guidance to CDs and other centre staff on managing families reactions/resistance and promoting the value of male role models
- Educating staff on the differences in risk thresholds and male approaches to play and child interactions
- Reinforce organisation expectations regarding equal employment opportunities and inclusive practice
- Linking new starters with other male educators
- Establishing “champions” to lead connections



Every guy I've worked
with in Goodstart is
really passionate
...men who are here,
want to be here.

Male Director, VIC

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