

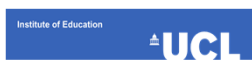
McHale, Joanne & Sullivan, Victoria (2019). Navigating gender roles: A comparison of the male early childhood workforce in Australia and Ireland. Paper presented on the 29th EECERA Annual Conference, 23.8.2019, Thessaloniki, Greece.

# “Oh! I didn’t realise a man can be a childcare worker!”

Navigating Gender Roles: A comparison of the male early childhood workforce in Australia and Ireland

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## Men in ECEC themes from the literature

Role modelling (Brown, 2004; Brownhill, 2014, 2015)

Pedagogy and practice (Besnard and Dirren, 2010, Gulbransen, 2012; Perkins, 2013; Brandes et al, 2015; Warin & Adriany, 2017)

Equality (Cameron, 2001)

Gendered roles and expectations (Cameron et al, 1999; Cremers et al, 2010; Peeters, Rohrmann and Emilsen, 2015)

Pay and conditions (Walshe, 2012)

Advanced Progression 'glass elevator' (Williams, 1992, Cameron, 2001)

Risk (Besnard and Dirren, 2010; Woltring, 2012)

Retention (Pirard et al, 2015)

## Demographic comparison

### Australia



- Occupational gender segregation is persistent in Australia, with men more likely to work full time than women, and have higher wages (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2015)
- Women expected to be involved in the workplace but still mostly responsible for household management and caregiving (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2018)
- Men more involved in domestic and caregiving roles (Department of Social Services, Australian Government, 2011)
- Violence against women, “let’s stop it at the start” campaign ([www.respect.gov.au](http://www.respect.gov.au))

### Ireland



- Marked by vast social change in the last 20 years (Fine-Davis, 2016)
- More secular and diverse society
- Women more involved in the workplace though still issues with under/over representation in certain sectors
- Men more involved in domestic and childcare labour (though still not equal) (ESRI, 2019)
- Impact of the economic recession 2007 on male-dominated sectors
- Gender balance gap in pay and professions on the political agenda e.g. Gender Equality Action Plan 2018-2020/election funding
- Women’s place as the carer still enshrined in the 1937 Constitution

## ECEC Comparison

### Australia



- Less than 3% of the Australian ECEC workforce are men
- Australian Early Years National Workforce Strategy estimate turnover of 30-50% across all levels of staff
- Focus on quality, educator rights and pay. Diversity is still mostly absent

### Ireland



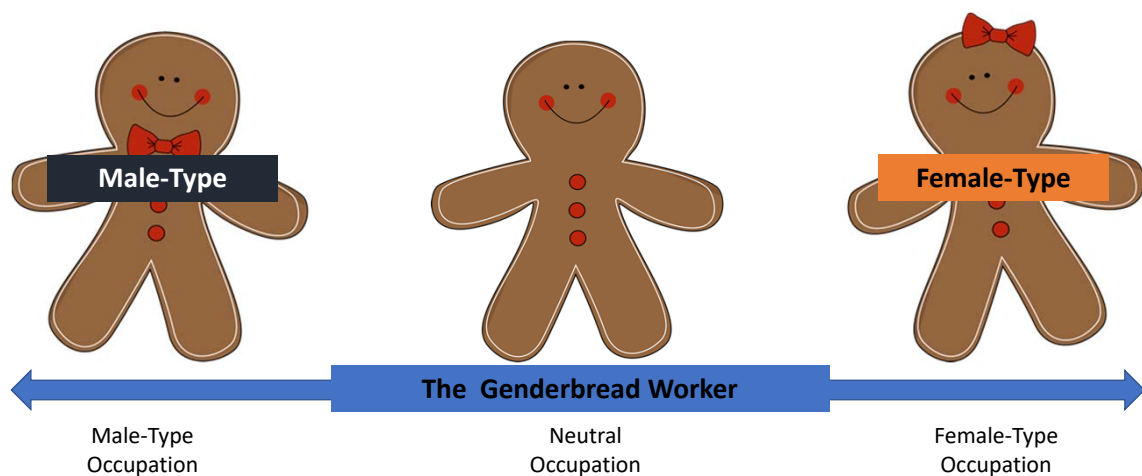
- Early childhood sector has developed in ad hoc manner to meet the needs of increasing parental working habits.
- More recently focus on benefit to children and quality.
- 1.5% men in the ECEC workforce (Pobal, 2018)
- Despite focus on needs/rights and diversity, gender balance is largely absent from the discourse

## Aims of this research

- Investigate men's experiences of the ECEC workplace in Australia and Ireland.
- Explore how male ECEC workers challenge gender roles
- Determine how male ECEC workers reinforce gender roles



## Theoretical framework



## WHAT underlies this problem?

### Occupational Sex-Segregation

- What happens when an individual and occupation gender do not match?
  - ▶ Exclusion
  - ▶ Discrimination
  - ▶ Tokenism



## Methodology

Data was collected from the respective doctoral studies in Ireland and Australia

- Qualitative, face to face interviews
- Narrative, Semi-Structured, Biographical and Storyline interview methods
- Interpretative qualitative approach, undertaking a thematic analysis to identify themes from the data (Thomas, 2006)



- Ireland:
  - 10 male participants



- Australia:
  - 6 male participants (thus far)

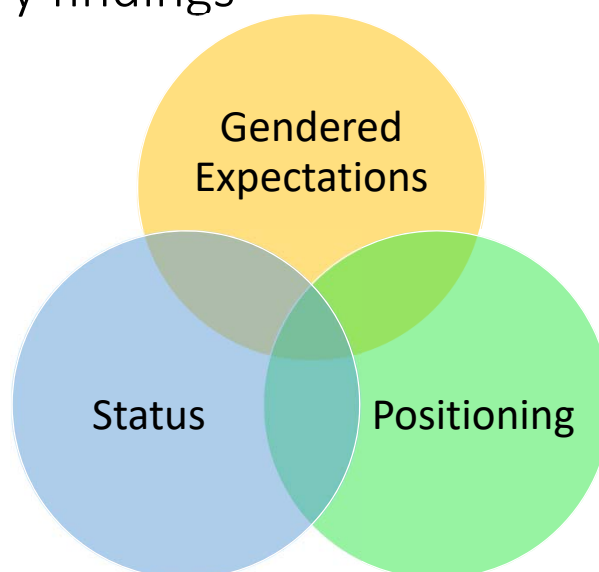
## Ethical Considerations



- This research was approved by the Ethics Boards of the institutions through which the research was conducted.
- The major ethical concerns for this thesis include confidentiality, interviewee emotional wellbeing, anonymity and informed consent.

## Preliminary findings

- Themes:



## Gendered expectations

- “Women’s Work”
- Risk /suspicion
- Expectation of Leadership
- “Men’s Jobs”
- Risky Play
- Breadwinner



## Gendered expectations

*“I ended up kind of being a kind of go to person for children who had..when they had really difficult behaviour” (Alan, Ireland)*

*“Yeah, you definitely get people that will look at you sideways and are like, ‘Oh! Okay.’. But then you get the other fathers like, ‘Oh wow, that’s awesome. There’s usually just the women’. You know, I get along with all the dads and the dads always - we have good chats.” (Edward, Australia)*

*“Yeah, for sure. Just the other day, “Can you and ((Cameron)) lift this big, heavy table out to the bin?” It’s like, “Yeah, I can do that,” and I’m more than happy. I understand why that job gets given to me and that’s fine.” (Herbert, Australia)*

*“I used, I love DIY myself anyway, but I remember getting lumped in for a lot of the DIY stuff d’you know? Fixing things and stuff like that” (Robert, Ireland)*

## Positioning

- Funny Guy/Clown
- Isolation
- Othering



## Positioning

*"I do think a lot of guys do come in to childcare d'you know often they're big kids themselves, d'you know? And the thing is, when I go on the floor, here as a manager and when I was in the early years it's lot of high fives and messing"*  
*(Robert, Ireland)*

*"At the start they'd all shut up when you'd first come into the canteen to get whatever, and then they'd just, once you're there a while they continue on the conversation. Now you mightn't even know who they're talking about and you'd be there going, that's a bit harsh"* *(Geoff, Ireland)*

*"I guess, in a way, you can't help but feel a little bit excluded. I wouldn't go so far as to say I felt excluded, if you know what I mean. I think there's a bit of a difference. I knew I was part of the team, I knew I was valued, I knew I belonged... Just a bit negligent, maybe. I'm not sure"* *(Herbert, Australia)*

*"I was the guy, if a kid got hurt and anyone needed to take care of it they said to me, 'Here's a hula hoop and tennis ball. Just entertain these 30 kids for 20 minutes.' That was my role."* *(Andrew, Australia)*

## Status

- Decreased Social Status
  - Babysitting
  - Not a “real job”
  - Weird & Unusual
- Elevated Internal Status
  - Glass Escalator
  - Hierarchy
  - Pedestal



## Status

*“I had to talk to a parent about their fees and all that and she got really antsy about it and she basically said to me, “Well, if you keep threatening my fees then I’m going to go to the police and tell them that you’re abusing my child.” (Anakin, Australia)”*

*“we had the chap that was convinced not to do childcare because he was a guy, d’you know it was like the career guidance teacher did speak to him, and was like psychiatric nursing, social care, social work, d’you know, anything bar childcare”*

*“A few of me mates now, the lads would go “are you mad? How can you put up with screaming children?” (Joshua)*

*“Let’s be honest. That’s what men want. They don’t want to sit... Men don’t want to do that. Let’s be honest. They want to run an empire. (Robert, Australia)*



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## Discussion

- Male educators are challenging gender stereotypes by entering the ECEC workforce simply because it is widely viewed as “women’s work.”
- However, gender norms are reinforced through the actions and thoughts of ECEC staff, parents AND men themselves in BOTH Australia and Ireland.
- The data from both Ireland and Australia evidence male educators navigating their roles through the similar issues of gendered expectations, positioning and status.



## Implications



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**Thank You**

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***Abstract***

Reconciling the role of men in early childhood continues to be a minefield (Tennhoff et al, 2015). And yet, in a sector characterized by persistent staffing issues, the potential for men's contribution cannot be ignored. This research sets out to compare the experiences of male educators in Australia and Ireland as they navigate their roles. This study follows previous international research on gender equality and the role of men in ECEC challenging traditional gender roles (Brody 2014) and the issues of contradictory positions of reinforcing stereotypes (Nentwich et al, 2013) and their recruitment as offering a solution to both labour shortages (Peeters, 2007) and gendered practices (Cameron, 2001). The construction of gender as embedded in social structures (Cameron et al, 1999; Borge, 2017) and men's navigation of a female dominated workforce underpins this research. We follow an interpretative qualitative approach, undertaking a thematic analyses of our interview data. Ethical approval for this research was granted through each researcher's University Ethics Board. Pseudonyms were used and all identifying data was removed to ensure participant anonymity. Men that enter the ECEC workforce are challenging gender stereotypes simply because it is seen as "women's work" (Sargent, 2004). Findings observed in the data from both countries demonstrates that gender norms can be reinforced through the actions and thoughts of the ECEC staff. The implications for governmental and industry policy, ECEC practice and the recruitment and retention of male educators as an ameliorating factor to staffing and gender roles are discussed.

***Keywords***

gender, workforce, recruitment, gendered roles, men in ECEC

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