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men AT WORK

Equal expectations of men caring for children at home aren't matched when it comes to being a professional educator: what's wrong with this manscape?

BY JUSTINE MCCLYMONT

A marketing asset, or a threat to peace, or just good educators: the men in our early and middle childhood education sector comprise a tiny 3% or less of all educators. In the reverse situation for genders policy makers might fund targeted employment programs but remain strangely silent on the male minority in children's services.

When Ben Jackson left the corporate world to pursue a long-held passion for education he was excited at the prospect of being able to finally make a difference. But he wasn't prepared for the response when he first started contacting early childhood centres to organise work placements. "I was met with coldness and closed doors and was even made aware of petitions to stop male educators applying for work or placements," says Ben. While many would have walked away, Ben has managed to go on to pursue a rewarding career in the early childhood sector, but it's

not been without challenges. "There are two options," says Ben. "You can become part of the percentage that break and leave the business, or you can stand up and be a part of something unique and amazing." "As an adult, it's an incredibly rare opportunity to love what you do professionally," says Ben. "I have felt in time embraced by the wider community, families and my peers. Every day I wake up and am excited by what the day will bring. The look of wonder on a child's face when they achieve elements of belonging, becoming and being is indescribably satisfying." Despite this passion for making a difference, male educators like Ben represent just 3.9% of the total number of staff working in long day care centres in Australia¹. With national policies and strategies calling for the early childhood sector to maintain a diverse workforce that reflects the community, why is this figure still so low?

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Perception and pay

As an advocate for male educators and coordinator of the MANscaping the Male Educator social media page, Ben says that the main barriers are perceptions and pay. “Males are made to defend their decision, reasons and passion for working in care roles constantly. This takes its toll and is exclusive to men in the sector. I have not seen or heard of a female educator being made to jump through the hoops I have had to with parents, children and services.

“Personally, I have seen some of the worst that men experience in the sector. I have been harassed, excluded and at several points had to seriously evaluate if I had a place within the present and future of education. Nappy changing and nurturing children is all something a dad would do, so why do we widely flip out when presented with a male in this situation away from a home environment?”

“ It’s a bit of a blind spot for policy makers. ”

These fears and gender stereotypes, coupled with comparatively low pay, are the main barriers to recruiting and retaining men in the early and middle childhood sector. “It is essential to have passion for the early years as, unfortunately, widely as a sector we are not paid our value,” says Ben.

A hard sell

Martyn Mills-Bayne, a lecturer in early childhood education at the University of South Australia says that these types of issues are impacting on the tertiary education sector’s ability to enrol and retain men in early childhood education courses.

“If I go out to high schools and talk to young men about what a wonderful career opportunity early childhood is, that’s not necessarily true. What they often come up against is that implicit bias or those sorts of challenges. There’s a fraught space for male educators in that they’re always on their toes about the possibility of false accusations and suggestions that they may be acting inappropriately. It’s really hard for me to position it as a wonderful choice of career with these looming threats; despite my belief that early childhood education is a great career for men and women,” says Martyn.

In an effort to provide support for students and reduce feelings of isolation, Martyn founded the MENtor Program for Males in Early Childhood Education. This program provides support for male students completing an Early Childhood Education degree or specialisation. Other support and awareness forums around the country also include the National Males in Early Childhood Network, MANscaping the Male Educator and the national MENU conference.

Not just women’s work

Despite the challenges, Craig d’Arcy, facilitator of the National Males in Early Childhood Network says that men have a crucial role to play in the education and care of young children.

“People working in the industry can clearly see that



having men around is a positive thing for the children, particularly those children that might not have that positive stable role model in their life," says Craig. "It can provide balance and show boys and girls that caring for and educating young children isn't just women's work. There's more father involvement in raising children now and community expectations have changed, but our early childhood services don't reflect that at all. We expect children to blur the lines of gender diversity in their play but as adults we continue to perpetuate stereotypes," says Craig.

Positive presence

Sharon Graham, a director in southern Sydney, has actively employed male educators and provided placements for male students. She says the response from children and families has been nothing but positive. "We have always encouraged and accepted male students and educators. We employed a male staff member years ago and it was so beneficial for the children," she says.

"Recently we had a university student and on the completion of his studies he applied for a job at the centre and began working with us. This was embraced by all families.

"In a generally female-dominated environment, male educators are priceless. Early childhood is such an important time and to have the masculine perspective and influence can be a wonderful benefit to children, especially boys."

Time for change

While a supportive workplace culture is essential for men to feel welcome to apply for and stay in roles, there's a bigger question of what needs to be done at the strategic level across Australia for any meaningful change to occur.

With the predicted workforce shortage in the early childhood sector, Craig also says there's an untapped opportunity to train and recruit men to boost staffing numbers.

"I think we have a long way to go in the early childhood sector in Australia. We're so far behind in so many ways, and it's a bit of a blind spot for policy makers. There's a lot of work to be done in relation to training, policies and incentives for employers. Men aren't currently mentioned within the key policy documents," he says.

When talking about the benefits of increasing the numbers of men, Craig says it's also about recognising and acknowledging the work that women do in the field. "That's very important," says Craig who is also a community preschool director in Northern NSW.

"There's a bit of a feeling that some women feel

threatened by this idea. It's one of the last areas that women have ownership of really. But there are so many more similarities between men and women. I work with all women and we're in it together. From my own experience, it's about making a difference and being a positive male role model."

“ It’s really hard to position it as a wonderful choice of career with these looming threats. ”

Quality or quantity?

Craig suggests that a specific industry target could help to increase numbers of men in the early childhood sector. "Other countries have found that to be a good strategy," says Craig. "It's not enough just to hope for men to apply; they need to be targeted."

"In Scotland, for example, they have men only childcare courses they've been running for years. That is a successful initiative where those targets really work," explains Craig. "In Denmark, they have a 10% goal that they're aiming towards for male educators with support from the government."

But while many would like to see more male educators, not everyone is convinced that a specific target is the way to go.

"I think by having a quota for the number of men it opens us up to the possibility of having lower quality educators for the sake of an arbitrary increase in numbers, rather than being concerned with high-quality education," says lecturer Martyn Mills-Bayne. "First and foremost, regardless of gender, I think high-quality education is critical," says Martyn.

Sharon agrees. "I'm not a fan of quotas or targets. Filling numbers for the sake of it does not necessarily equate to quality or having people really follow their passion. It's more about the sector promoting itself and encouraging males to consider it an option. The issue of pay rates across the early childhood industry still needs to be addressed to encourage our sector to grow and flourish." The early childhood sector could also look at how women have successfully been encouraged to enter non-traditional roles like science and engineering says Martyn. "We do so well in encouraging women and girls into STEM and into the traditional male subjects. I think



we need to learn from that," he says.

Ben Jackson is also keen to point out that, at a practical level, communication is essential. "Some of the core issues in the sector come from inside our world. Through the gender roles we unknowingly stereotype to a general lack of communication with peers. Part of the solution is to raise awareness through articles like this or participating in advocacy platforms."

"The challenge that I face most regularly as a male educator is that my desire is to be an exceptional educator; one who is not afraid of actively leading

necessary change across the sector, as opposed to simply being an exceptional male educator," says Ben. "I want to be held against and considered among the best of the best across the sector regardless of gender, but instead for the standards I hold, the expectations of children I share and a passion for quality education."

¹2016 Early Childhood and Education Care National Workforce Census

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- Ben, 2017 Australian Family Early Education & Care Awards National Educational Experience Rising Star winner
- Professor Lester-Irabinna Rigney, University of South Australia: School of Education
- Dr Vaughan Cruickshank, Lecturer in Health and Physical Education University of Tasmania
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