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How many men work in the English early years sector? Why is the low figure so 'stubbornly resistant to change'?

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Abstract

This study draws on data from the GenderEYE project, research conducted in England between 2018 and 2020, which aimed to examine the recruitment, support and retention of male teachers within early years education (EYE) with a view of developing a more gender diverse workforce in this sector. Data collection was by means of a survey, 9 case studies with early years settings and interviews with key stakeholders. In this study, we examine a key finding about the persistently low numbers of male EYE professionals, linking this to another finding concerning a lack of specific strategy to recruit and support men.

KEYWORDS

diversity, early years, education, gender, workforce

INTRODUCTION

For many years, a statistical statement has been ubiquitous in discussions about the lack of male practitioners working in the early years in England. We see, time and again, the statement that 2% or 3% of the workforce is male. For example, in the workforce strategy produced by the English Department for Education (DfE), we find this claim: 'From 2008 – 2013, the proportion of male staff in the workforce has remained consistently low at 2% (Provider Survey, 2013)' (DfE, 201: p.23). The GenderEYE project, conducted from 2018 to 2020 in England, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), aimed to test out this figure, see if it had changed and also to profile this element of the workforce examining several key descriptors such as age profile, level of qualifications and duration of service.

There are two reasons for developing a firmer and more reliable evidence base to determine the numbers of men and offer insights into the kinds of profiles they have. Firstly, it seems extraordinary in an age where there has been an increase in gender awareness, or at least much noise in social media about gender issues, to find this pocket of practice that appears to be so strongly gendered and so resistant to change. Understandings of gender—how it is experienced and how it affects lives—are changing rapidly, prompting commentators to declare that 'we are in the midst of a gender revolution' (*National Geographic,* January 2017). Gender equality has also been given prominence as it is one of the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals to 'transform our world' (United Nations, 2021). So, firstly, the GenderEYE project aimed to establish, during this time when there is so much public attention to gender equality, how far the early years workforce is changing. If we are to develop policies on the gender diversification of the early years workforce, we need to have a baseline understanding about how many men are currently employed in the sector and who they are. Secondly, and relatedly, the study had a stated aim to find out how far there is any explicit strategy aimed at increasing the numbers of male workers. In this study, we discuss our findings about the existence of strategies at the level of individual settings, chains of providers, local authorities and national policies. This evidence about the number and profile of the male element of the workforce, together with findings about strategies, can then provide a springboard for workforce-focused policy and practice. It provides the basis for institutional, local and national policy to bring about change.

We commence by providing the contextual policy background and overview of the relevant research literature to establish the current research landscape. What do we already know about 'how many men' there are in England and who they are? How does this compare with other countries? Why might we expect the figure to have changed and why might we not? Our answers to these questions set the scene for the GenderEYE project and its aims. The study then goes on to describe the project's methodology, its integration of a questionnaire with case studies featuring observations and interviews. We then highlight the questionnaire findings to identify and discuss the data we have gathered concerning the numbers of male early years practitioners together with data about who they are, including their age profile, level of qualifications, routes into the sector and duration of employment there. We then reveal findings about strategies for recruitment and support of male teachers. The study then moves into a discussion of the significance of these findings with particular attention given to our findings about a lack of strategy for improving the recruitment and support for men in the sector. Our aim in writing this article is not to rationalise a need for increasing male presence in the early years as we have done this elsewhere (e.g. Warin, 2019). It is a 'given' underlying in this study that there is a desperate need for a gender diverse workforce in the early years. Instead, we aim to explore whether there has been any recent increase in the low number of male employees in the early years and relatedly, what efforts have gone into strategies for an increase.

THE CURRENT EVIDENCE BASE IN ENGLAND AND ACROSS THE WORLD

The 3% paralysis in England

In 2017, the DfE in England published its 'Workforce Strategy' document which included a chapter on the 'Gender diversity of the workforce' with the statement 'we want more men to choose to work in the early years sector' (DfE, 2017: p.25). It quoted evidence that the proportion of male

staff in the workforce had remained consistently low between 2008 and 2013 citing the 2013 Provider Survey. Bonetti's, 2018 report on the early years workforce presented the UK figure as 3% male, a figure that she points out is consistent with other OECD countries (p.11). The independent research organisation CEEDA produced a survey-based snapshot of the workforce in summer 2017 reporting that 'men account for just 5% of the PVI [private, voluntary or independent] early years workforce' (p.4). The slightly higher figure reported by CEEDA may be explained by the inclusion of all men regardless of whether they had direct contact with children and therefore incorporating men with peripheral roles in the setting. So the consensus, just at the time of starting our study, based on the workforce strategy and the Bonetti report was approximately 3%.

Has there ever been a time when men occupied a greater role in early years education? Burn and Pratt Adams (2015) commence their UK-focused discussion of men teaching children, covering ages 3–13, with an arresting historical claim 'At the start of the 19th century, the first infant school teachers were radical young men who aimed to change society' (p.15), noting the pioneering work of Robert Owen who set up an infant school in 1817 for the children of his factory workers. They then reveal how the gender egalitarian teaching workforce of this time, early 19th century, was brushed aside by the influential Victorian Infant School Movement which used essentialist discourses of men's and women's 'natural' aptitudes to reproduce an idealised model of the heterosexual family within the public world of the infant school. By the late 1830s, male participation was no longer in evidence.

Nearly 200 years later, we are now in a state of paralysis with this deeply entrenched and infrequently challenged pattern of a gender-segregated occupation. Comparisons with Britain's related care professions are illuminating, as there is a similar recognition that men provide an underused workforce resource, for example, in adult social care (Slawson, 2017) and in the long-term care sector (Hussein et al., 2016). In social work, the current figure for men is 14% while in primary school education it is 15% (Warin, 2018). Nursing has often been a sector where comparisons are made. For example, Whittock and Leonard (2003) drew attention to the low numbers of male nurses in the UK, rarely exceeding 10% at the time of their article, highlighting a lack of careers advice and a need for male-inclusive training with a gender awareness focus. The figure is still much the same at 11% as reported by Williams (2017) based on figures from the Nursing and Midwifery Council. This higher proportion may reflect some relevant changes in nursing, for example, that nurses are now trained at degree level for which until recently there were bursaries available; salaries are higher and there are greater opportunities in nursing to specialise. While still disproportionately low, the 11% figure in nursing is significantly higher than we have seen in early years education in any other country in the world even in those with the strong local and national efforts to increase the number. It is clear that the early childhood education and care workforce is the least gender diverse of the caring professions.

Twenty years ago, the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) set a national target in their Early Years Development and Childcare Partnership Planning Guidance 2001–2002 to increase the recruitment of men to 6% by 2004 (Lewis, 2002). This policy target was accompanied by a theoretical interest in the potential benefits of a mixed-gender workforce spearheaded by Owen, Cameron and Moss, who held a landmark international seminar on 'Men as workers in services for young children: issues of a mixed gender workforce' (Cameron, 2006; Owen et al., 1998). During the early years of the millennium, a general policy interest in early years education, under New Labour, focused on the pioneering work of Early Excellence Centres and the Sure Start initiative which included policy on men's childcare as teachers and fathers. At this time a handful of pioneering early years settings such as the Sheffield Children's Centre and the Penn Green Centre promoted men's involvement (Bertram & Pascal, 1999). Academic work on

this topic also flourished in the related area of men's engagement in primary school teaching (Skelton, 2009; Thornton & Bricheno, 2006). However, despite this interest and the setting of a national target, there was no change and the target was unmet, as Rolfe concluded in her 2005 overview.

Scotland and Wales have also adopted strategies to encourage more men into early years and to address gender stereotypes more widely. For example, The Scottish Funding Council outlines a number of strategies in its 'Gender Action Plan' (SFC, 2016) to address gender imbalances in study subjects at colleges and universities. One of its strategies involves providing awards to colleges and universities to run men-only introductory training as a way to increase the number of men enrolling on the NC and HNC Childhood Practice courses. In Scotland, initiatives are able to build on the advocacy work of another key individual, Kenny Spence. Similarly, the Welsh Government's Early Years Workforce Plan (2017) and the NDNA Workforce Survey Wales (2018/19) acknowledge the absence of diversity among its workforces and the need to recruit more men.

A much more recent landmark moment occurred in 2016 when David Wright who runs a small chain of nurseries in Southampton organised with colleagues the first national Men in the Early Years conference. The event attracted participation from a hundred key people in the early years who shared an appetite for bringing about a positive change to the low presence of male child carers. Since then, there has been an upsurge in the numbers of local, regional and national UK networks of early years professionals with an interest in recruiting, retaining and supporting more men in EYE. Men in the Early Years (MITEY) groups have emerged as a force for support (e.g. in Bristol, Southampton and Bradford) with a sequence of national conferences and a recent national campaign #MITEY led by the Fatherhood Institute and identified in the DfE's Early Years Workforce Strategy (2017). In addition, a few pioneering preschool settings have developed a critical mass of male staff such as the Childbase Partnership–funded nursery where Warin and Marlow recently carried out a pilot study to explore the recruitment and support of its five male practitioners (see Warin, 2018). The London Early Years Foundation (LEYF) has also been consistently involved in campaigning for men in early childhood education over many years. Their website claims: 'LEYF has been campaigning for more Men in Childcare for the last eight years. We are proud that 8% of our workforce are male compared to a national average of just under 3%'.

Several key individuals have made a significant contribution to this policy agenda. For example, David Wright, as mentioned above, and Jeremy Davies, our partner in the GenderEYE project, who has hosted MITEY on the Fatherhood Institute's website and received DfE funding in 2019 for a London-based national MITEY conference. David and Jeremy recently led the DfE Task and Finish group constituted by the DfE to follow-up the recommendations of the Early Years Workforce Strategy on the gender diversification of the workforce (DfE, 2019). June O' Sullivan is also very well known for her focus on the recruitment and support of men in the London Early Years Foundation. Invaluable though these individuals are, and instrumental in driving this agenda forwards, there is a need for a more stable and consistent long-term strategy.

Will this current wave of interest be sufficient to turn the tide of 'stubborn' resistance that was noted by Wright and Brownhill (2018: p.21), who claim that the male early years workforce has remained 'stubbornly' at 2% for years? The entrenched low proportion of male practitioners seems to be an outlier, an oddity, in a world that is, supposedly, becoming more gender sensitive.

A global pattern

How far is this stubborn pattern a worldwide phenomenon? A number of international researchers have commented in recent years on the global pattern of a low male presence in the early years workforce. These include: Drudy et al., 2005; Cameron, 2006; Oberhuemer et al., 2010; McGrath & Sinclair, 2013; Peeters et al., 2015; Sak et al., 2015; Warin, 2018; Wright & Brownhill, 2018; OECD, 2018, and Brody et al., 2021. However, despite this international consistency there are also differences between countries. We now present a brief round-up of the current state of play in countries across the globe, during the last decade, so we may compare these with 2/3% figure in England, identifying which countries have a policy interest in the gender diversification of the early years workforce.

A recent report from OECD claims that the proportion of male workers in most countries is no more than 3% of the workforce (2018: p. 399). Norway is identified as having the highest proportion of male practitioners in Europe, at 9% and Turkey is particularly noteworthy with a figure of almost 6% showing a rapid increase over the preceding decade (Rohrmann et al., 2021). However, the general pattern is that more than half of the EU member states have less than 1% of male practitioners and no European country has reached the benchmark set by the European Commission Childcare Network in 1995 to achieve 20% male early childhood workers by 2006 (OECD, 2006).

Similar patterns can be observed in other parts of the world. Sak et al., (2015) pointed out that the figure is less than 1% in both New Zealand and Mongolia, and around 1.1% in Taiwan. The US Bureau of Labor Statistics 2012–2013 study (cited in the US 'Teaching Tolerance' website) claims a 2.3% figure in the USA for pre-kindergarten and kindergarten teachers. Discussion has also begun in recent times in Asia. For example, UNESCO's 2007 report for Asia-Pacific argued for a greater male presence in early childhood education. A recent international study of men's trajectories within the early years of education (Rohrmann et al., 2021) shows a chart of timelines, from 1998 to 2018, depicting the proportion of male workers from the countries participating in their study (Figure 1).

Here we can see an increase in the proportion of men in Nordic countries, Germany, Australia and Turkey. However, in China, the proportion of male practitioners does not appear to have increased. This lack of change may be explained by the rapid increase in the EYE workforce during this time.

In several countries, it is difficult to describe a whole national picture as there is an inconsistent pattern of activity and success with some localised pockets of success (see Rohrmann & Brody, 2015, for example). We have noted this in our discussion above of the patchy picture of policy and activity in England where localised areas of activity boost the overall average (in LEYF, for example). In some countries, the recognition of local grassroots advocacy is harnessed as a national strategy based on the value of a 'bottom-up' strategy where localised success could, potentially, inspire national change. The national focus on gender in countries such as Norway, Belgium and Germany is linked to the level of funding for strategies to increase male participation. In the following section, we provide a brief overview of strategies used by these countries (Peeters et al., 2015).

In the Nordic countries, gender-focused policies concerning gender pay equality, employment hours, childcare and parental leave work are in harmony towards the broad aim of gender equality. In Norway, significant funding was dedicated to the recruitment of men and this was a key focus in four Government Action Plans for Equality (Norwegian Ministry of Children, Equality and Social Inclusion, 2014). Networks for Men in Kindergartens (MIB) were set up around the

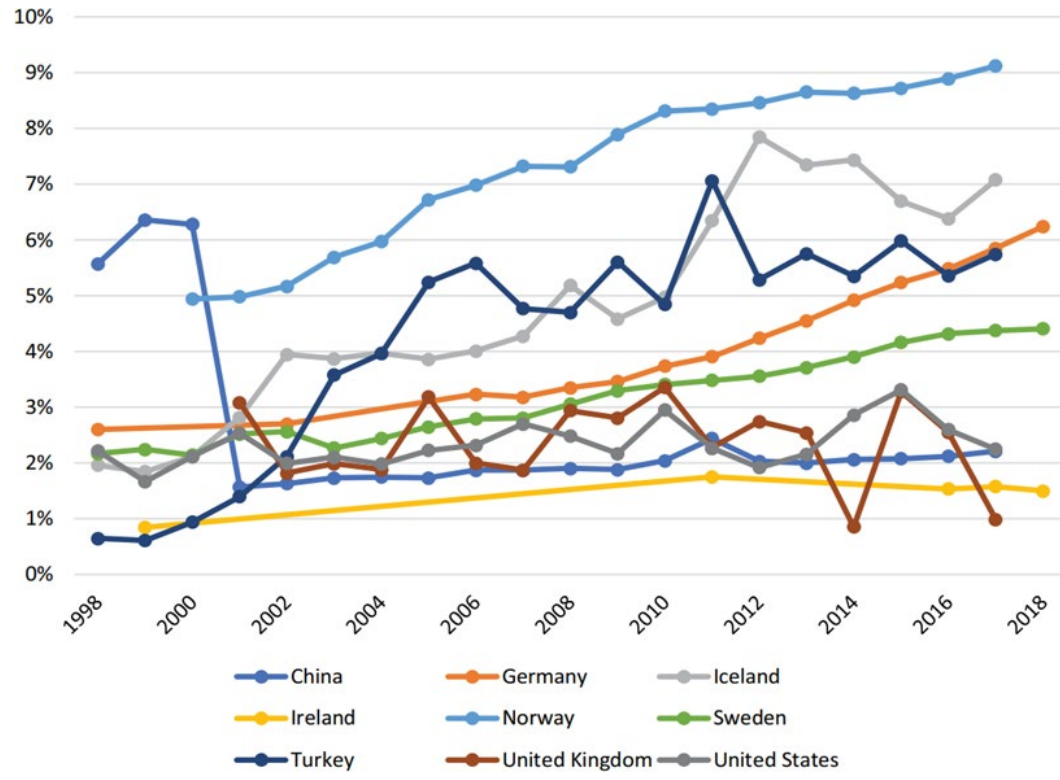

FIGURE 1 Rohrmann et al., 2021

country and there was greater public discussion about the importance of men in young children's lives. A target of 20% was set for the male element of the EY workforce by 2020.

The 'Men in Childcare' project developed by the Flemish Community of Belgium was supported by the European Social Fund and Flemish governmental organisations for employment and childcare. Running parallel with the project was a media campaign to promote men working in this sector. Important research was conducted during this period on the profile of men working in Flemish childcare which led to changes in the quality of careers guidance.

In Germany, the Federal Ministry of Family Affairs began to develop and fund projects for recruiting men in 2008. A co-ordination centre was set up in 2010 after which the 'More Men in Kitas' programme commenced with the support of 13.5 million euros from the European Social Fund. A number of regional projects in Germany focused on careers guidance and experience, gender sensitivity training, conferences, working groups for male practitioners and media campaigns.

Peeters et al., (2015) point out that in these countries, small but positive advances have resulted from a large investment of attention and finances, although the results are somewhat disappointing given the level of funding and government backing (see also Van Laere et al., 2014).

It is also important to consider salaries and status among early years professions in different countries. In the UK, salaries are very low and, although some professionals are highly qualified, a large number of workers may be employed without any early years training at all. This is very different from some European countries such as Norway, France and Belgium, where salaries are considerably higher although the number of men is still relatively low. Pay, therefore, is not the main reason for the absence of men in early years education (Peeters et al., 2015).

We may draw three conclusions from this round-up of international evidence. Firstly, in countries where there have been increases in the number of male workers, the proportion of men in the workforce does not appear to change because it is often in these countries where there has been an expansion of EYE provision with an increased workforce. Secondly, the countries with the strongest and best, funded, strategies, which have put the most effort into this policy challenge, have had the most success. However, as our Norwegian colleagues testify, they have to maintain this level of effort or the figure diminishes. Thirdly, when set against the international evidence, the English pattern appears to be typical. The gendered nature of the workforce is as persistent in England as it is in the rest of the world.

So this was the state of play when we commenced the GenderEYE study. The study's overall aim was to examine how men are recruited, supported and retained in the early years workforce. In order to achieve this aim, an important sub-aim was to establish how many men are actually employed in the sector and who they are. Would we find further evidence of the stubborn 2/3% pattern? Or might we perhaps find an increase especially as a result of a growing interest in some key areas of the country? Before moving into a presentation of the findings, we now outline the study's methodology.

METHODOLOGY

The GenderEYE study began with a knowledge exchange visit to Trondheim, hosted by our Norwegian partner. This event served to engage the research team with early years professionals and advocates who were located in four key 'hubs' of activity in England: Bristol, Bradford, Southampton and London. Following the Norway visit, we conducted seminars in each hub with the hub leader, early years practitioners, managers and representatives from linked training providers and careers services. These events were an opportunity for the GenderEYE team to present the aims of the study and for the leader of the hub to disseminate learning from the Norwegian visit. The final part of the meeting involved a focus group discussion on the recruitment, support and retention of men in EY, which also provided an opportunity to consider settings in the local area for the case study part of the research. In total, seven case studies of early years settings were undertaken. These comprised of a researcher visit to the setting for 2–3 days, including 6 and 10 semi-structured interviews with male and female practitioners and managers; 1–2 focus groups and observations in classrooms/sessions with children recorded through field notes. The team also conducted interviews with 15 individuals involved directly in the early years profession or in recruiting and training such as early years consultants, teacher trainers, recruitment officers, careers personnel in schools, colleges and recruitment agencies and representatives from key early years organisations. The analysis of the qualitative data was undertaken following the model promoted by Braun and Clarke (2006) to produce a set of analytic themes within the broader framework created by the project's key research questions and was supported by NVivo software.

The project also devised and implemented a survey. A key aim of the survey was to explore, in detail, the frequently cited statistic concerning the proportion of male practitioners who work within the early years workforce. In addition, we wanted to find out more about who these men are in terms of their age range, qualifications, previous experience and routes into the profession. We created two surveys, using Qualtrix software, for different respondent groups: practitioners/staff in early years settings and managers. The survey for practitioners covered questions about age group; previous experience in early years work; roles, activities and types of interactions with children; perceptions about problematic areas of work; preferred activities and future aspirations.

For the managers, there were two options. Participating managers could take our 'super speedy survey' promoted as 'the shortest survey you will ever be likely to do', intended to take only one minute. The aim here was to gain insight into the very straightforward question regarding numbers of men employed in settings. Respondents were asked to answer two simple questions: number of overall staff currently on the payroll who work directly with children; and the number of male staff on the payroll who work directly with children. Managers then had the option of completing a longer 5- to 10-min survey with questions profiling the male employees and gaining information on their age ranges, qualifications, allocations to tasks, perceptions of male task preferences, strategies for attracting men, numbers of applications from men and reasons for leaving (if relevant). The survey was promoted on the GenderEYE website, through various early years sector networks, through the project's steering committee and other groups and contacts together with the widely read Nursery World magazine. Survey items were initially mapped onto the project's broad research questions to ensure a consistency of focus within project's scope of inquiry. The 'speedy survey' was analysed first in order to give the big picture statistic about the proportion of male employees. We analysed the data in two stages, answering two broad questions: how many men are employed and who are they?

FINDINGS

We were disappointed at the low level of survey response although we had anticipated the enormous challenge of engaging this 'fragmented' sector (Bonetti, 2018). The largest element of the sector is the private, voluntary and independent (PVI) grouping of settings who, by virtue of being private, are hard to reach in any concerted way. Despite our efforts to harness assistance from several sector umbrella organisations such as National Daycare Association, Early Years Alliance, CEEDA and also the widely read 'Nurseryworld' magazine, we only received 298 'speedy' manager surveys, 184 longer manager surveys and 424 practitioner surveys.

Findings about the numbers of men and who they are

Our main intention was to find out whether there had been any change to the 2/3% figure. The main purpose of the 'Speedy Survey' was to disentangle this statistic focusing specifically on the employed staff working directly with children in the setting. It was important to identify that we only wanted to count the men who work 'directly with children' as we had noticed, from our qualitative case studies, that several men were employed in various capacities that did not necessarily involve direct engagement with the children such as chefs and gardeners. In fact, 46% of settings ($n = 159$) had a male member of staff employed specifically to work with children.

The headline finding is that the figure is still remarkably persistent with only a very slight, negligible, improvement. Of all the settings included in the responses from the survey, the overall percentage of males working directly with children was reported to be 4.4%. The average per cent of male staff in any setting that claimed to employ male practitioners was 9.5%, a noteworthy finding that supports the popular idea that the existing presence of men, or at least one man, will attract others (see Warin, 2018, for discussion of the principle in a setting with five male practitioners). Our overall 4.4% finding of males working in early years is only slightly higher than the 3% previously quoted. This very slight increase can, in any case, be accounted for by explaining that the survey is likely to have been spotted and answered by those who are more alert to this

particular research problem. When we have taken account of that phenomenon, the result of the survey is not newsworthy. However, this lack of improvement is itself notable and worthy of more thought, theorising and discussion of implications.

We now turn to our findings concerning age profile, qualifications, routes into the profession and duration of service. We were curious to see how far age intersected with gender within the work force. Bonetti's report on the workforce showed that the highest proportion of early years paid staff in the 'group based providers' (equivalent to our own sample) was in the 30–39 age bracket (Bonetti, 2018: p13). We asked managers to report on 'approximate ages of the male staff currently on the payroll at your setting(s)' using the categories: under 18, 18–25, 26–40, 41–60 and 61+. One-third of the men were reported to be under 25 and 11% were 61+ with the largest proportion in the 26–40 age bracket. However, this pattern is not noteworthy as it is consistent with the overall early years workforce pattern of age distribution as a whole (see Bonetti, 2018, for example) and is not specifically gendered.

In the practitioners' survey, we asked 'Do you hold any Early Years qualifications?' We also asked for specification of levels with the option to select from the English qualification levels from lowest (Level 1) to highest (postgraduate). We found that around 90% practitioners, men and women ($n = 385$ for this question), have a specific early years qualification. This is a positive finding in a sector that is so often asked to defend its professional status. Bonetti (2018) shows that at least 89% of her sample (in the group providers category) have a qualification at level 2 or above. Level 2 is highly significant as this is the benchmark for determining whether a member of staff can be counted in calculations of the all-important staff : child ratio. We did not find a strong gender difference in the level of qualification with 92% of female staff and 88% of male staff holding a specific early years qualification.

Table of men's highest qualifications ($n = 189$ for this question).

Level	Number	Percentage
1 (GCSE, lower grades and equivalent)	23	12
2 (GCSE (higher grades, intermediate apprenticeship and equivalent)	32	17
3 (A level, AS level, NVQ and equivalent)	45	24
4 (level 4 NVQ and higher apprenticeship)	19	10
5 (foundation degree, level 5 and equivalent)	19	10
6 (BA/BSc degree and equivalents)	29	15
7 (MA/MSc and equivalents)	22	12

Our similar finding of 90% makes an interesting contrast with Norway, our partners in this research, where the much higher proportion of male employees is perhaps partly explained by the prevalence of voluntary and 'under-qualified' early childhood practitioners. What is also perhaps interesting here is the low number of unqualified male staff represented in the survey. Early years settings are able to recruit a significant number of staff without formal early years qualifications as long as this falls within the relevant ratios of qualified/unqualified staff. It means that a lack of qualifications is not necessarily an obstacle to recruiting men into the profession. There is potentially a recruitment gap here that could be explored more strategically when considering how to recruit more men. To some extent, this is taken advantage of through the apprenticeship route as a larger percentage of men compared to women began their early years careers as apprentices (13% of men compared with 5% of women). Furthermore, a higher proportion of males

(61%) in comparison to females (50%) had been employed in another job prior to working as an EY practitioner, suggesting a more protracted route into the sector.

Our data on duration of service suggest that men's careers in early years education may be less stable than women's. From the managers perceptions ($n = 102$), the majority (55%) of managers felt that male practitioners were typically employed for a shorter length of time than their female co-workers. In total ($n = 356$), over 58% practitioners viewed working within the early years as a long-term profession (e.g. 15+ years). However, this opinion was held by a higher proportion of females (62%) in comparison to males (47%). Our findings, from both the qualitative and quantitative data, show that men's careers in the early years are marked by movement. Some male practitioners have moved from primary into EYs; others begin in early years with a view to moving into primary education. Male practitioners who were new to EYs (within 5 years) expressed greater interest in moving 'somewhere', although it was often unclear where. They did not always have a specific career path but expressed a strong interest in working in education and with children. A number of practitioners expressed interest in applying for management positions or specialising such as 'Special Needs'. There is a strong sense that practitioners want to keep their options open and that their current role is a stepping stone. Both quantitative and qualitative data show that men experience a greater sense of precariousness within their careers than their female counterparts. Most reported that more than half (51% of men versus 6% of women) have contemplated leaving the profession due to concerns around allegations of sexual abuse. These findings are consistent with others such as Brody, et al., (2021), who report on the gendered pattern of the Norwegian 'drop out' rate in early childhood teacher training at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels. They claim that more than twice as many men interrupt their studies compared with women (Statistics Norway, 2019).

Our headline finding then is that nothing has changed with regard to the traditional gendered occupation of childcare. However, this apparent non-finding is indeed a finding that is very much worthy of further thought and theorisation, especially when set against a background of supposedly increased gender sensitivity within society. In an attempt to understand this paralysis, we can fruitfully draw straightaway on another key finding from our study—a lack of explicit strategy with the early years sector as a whole and within individual settings to really challenge and tackle this problem.

Findings about strategies

The findings of our study indicate that there is no clear overall strategy to bring men into early years (Warin et al., 2020: p.8). More specifically, in our managers' survey in answer to the question 'have you used any specific recruitment strategies targeted at men in your setting?', we found that less than a fifth (14%) of early years settings have pursued specific strategies aimed at recruiting men. We also found that 50% of settings have received no applications from male practitioners. We found that settings were aware of the low numbers of men they employed and were eager to recruit more. However, they were very uncertain about how to make a change. Managers did not draw on specific strategies, such as positive action, because they were sometimes concerned about the impact of a gendered recruitment process on safeguarding. Settings also recognised an unconscious bias within the early years recruitment processes, and the need for more diverse recruitment panels. We observed, however, that settings were often gender sensitive in terms of recognising the importance of creating mixed-gender workforces and addressing stereotypes with children.

A significant finding from the qualitative data were the gaps within careers guidance for boys and young men. Participants expressed a belief that children receive careers guidance very late in their education—for example, in years 10 and 11, by which time children have already established boundaries around what is gender appropriate. Furthermore, changes in the provision of schools careers services, for example, the increasing costs around providing work experience and changing perceptions around the importance of careers guidance in schools, have impacted on the quality and accessibility of this service for young people and children. This means that boys in school receive very little exposure to early years as a career and, as a result, this area of work does not figure on their careers radar. Several quotations from our qualitative data illustrate the 'blindness' about the possibility of a career in early years education for young men. For example, a male practitioner told us that '... It wouldn't have been the natural for me to do early years. It never crossed my mind basically'. An early years teacher trainer pointed out:

> 'Quite honestly, men will not come unless they're invited. They're not going to come, unless there is more of an effort. We are attacking it the wrong way. We're not inviting them in. We're not putting them off, they were never put on in the first place. They never thought about it.'

Furthermore, our findings show that careers guidance adopts a 'neutral' or 'user-led' approach, enabling advisors to find out what children like and feel they are good at, and make suggestions accordingly. This encounter may be a conversation between a human advisor and the young person or may involve responding to answers on a computer. A user-led careers guidance is often perceived positively and, in particular, as a way to avoid career stereotyping. However, the absence of interactions (either human or digital) which challenges the individual or helps them explore areas they would not have otherwise considered means that boys do not choose, or consider, early years as a career.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study now moves on to discuss the two linked findings above: the confirmation of the remarkably low proportion of men working in early childhood education; and the lack of strategy to challenge this pattern. We use these findings to explore why it is so challenging to increase the small percentage of male practitioners.

The absence of strategy is symptomatic of an underlying gender apathy. In many settings, the idea of recruiting men is, at best, simply not on the employer's horizons or is viewed (or hoped) to be something that will just happen by itself. Settings demonstrated an interest in recruiting men and an awareness of gender diverse workforces but often felt overwhelmed with the challenges facing the early years sector as a whole. The low salaries and status of early years professionals also play a significant role in the lack of progression. This is not to suggest that salaries should be raised in order to attract more men; instead, it is to recognise that the early years sector is struggling to survive in an increasingly competitive market and to manage the everyday social and educational demands made upon it. Our findings showed that recruiting men, and keeping them, required planning, reflective practices and doing things differently. It required time and resources. This meant that creating a mixed-gender workforce was low down on the agenda for many settings.

There is also the perception that male practitioners cannot be recruited because there are no male applicants available and that this is due to men not wanting to take up this area of work. However, the findings of our study show that gaps in careers guidance mean that boys and men rarely experience opportunities to engage in the world of early years education; it is something that young men have, quite simply, never thought about. Furthermore, boys and men are rarely represented in the visual materials used to promote early years education as career.

So what kinds of strategies and policies can be devised and activated to trigger the necessary workforce change? Since we found a lack of strategy at governmental and local authority levels and among individual providers (albeit with a few notable exceptions, see Warin et al., 2020), it is helpful to think about the different levels of policy: macro, meso and micro. We can suggest national strategies, strategies at the level of the early years setting and we can also note the advocacy and personal drive of individuals, change makers, who are strategically positioned as key influencers. This multi-level approach was adopted in the report from the English DfE's Gender Diversification Task and Finish Group who produced a report in 2019 which included a series of practicable recommendations aimed at these different levels (DfE, 2019). These include, at national level, a recommendation for a national concerted campaign. At the level of the provider, there are various strategic suggestions, which are echoed in the practical recommendations identified in the GenderEYE toolkit, aimed at providers and practitioners. Many of these have been tried out during the training sessions that formed the final part of the project. These include: creating male-friendly recruitment materials (with particular attention to the framing and phrasing of job adverts); harnessing opportunities for reaching out to men (e.g. by going to 'where the men are', involving existing staff, conducting open days and providing the right kind of imagery), positive action (e.g. creating welcoming statements in job adverts) and supporting male recruits (through several specifically tailored support strategies).

One strategy that can be operated at micro, meso and macro political levels is to set a specific target number of male recruits to the workforce. There have already been several mentions throughout this study of attempts to set national targets which have failed. Perhaps because of this history, and unmet targets in the UK and in Europe, there is a reluctance to set a target which creates a 'hostage to fortune' and may be impossible to fulfil. However, target setting has the advantage of keeping an issue alive, and requiring specific actions to achieve it. This topic formed part of a lively debate at the first national men's conference in Southampton in 2016 with an emerging consensus from the practitioners, academics and other interested parties who were assembled there that a target is a necessary strategy for pushing recruitment efforts. The DfE Gender Diversification report (2019) decided to set 'an aspirational target for the sector of 30% of the EYE workforce male by 2030'. The authors of this study would like to see this recommendation taken up and widely promoted.

Our study also recognised that isolated individuals or settings sometimes take 'small but significant steps towards recruiting men' (Warin et al., 2020: p8). We have already mentioned above how several key individuals within the UK have acted as powerful advocates. Foremost among these is David Wright, who initiated the first national Men in the Early Years conference in 2016, also originated a National Men in the Early Years Charter as 'a visual way for Early Years settings to demonstrate their "loud and proud" commitment to men in the Early Years' (Wright & Brownhill, 2018: p.193). Other individuals are likely to take up the baton of advocacy for men in the early years but these individual attempts must surely be embedded in a wider national effort in order to bring about long-lasting change.

CONCLUSIONS

One of our key findings concerns a lack of strategy to recruit and support male teachers. The government and most early years employers have done very little to recruit and retain male staff. Although we have observed examples of good practice in recruiting and supporting male practitioners in our case studies, these have been few and far between and often the result of efforts from key individuals. We have concluded that women remain the default position in the recruitment of early years workforces and as a consequence 'the development of mixed gender workforces is slow and sporadic' (Warin et al., 2020: p.2).

During this time, when there is so much public attention on gender equality, it is extraordinary to see just how intransigent the early years workforce is based on traditional gender roles which are assumed to be 'natural'. It is no wonder that our project has confirmed the very low and unchanging proportion of men employed in the early years. This may be considered surprising given that there has been so much media attention given to gender since the start of the #MeToo movement in 2017. It would appear that this particular part of the gender jigsaw has just not been visible enough and that the lack of visibility is compounded by the current workforce priorities outlined above.

A clear way forward would be to develop and implement gender-sensitive activities enabling young children to see, hear and learn about the ways in which men and women engage in caring activities, either through learning materials, stories or role play. Such activities would be supported by reflexive spaces for early years practitioners and managers to explore gender sensitivity within their early years practices. In the long term, it would mean developing a new gender-aware generation for whom the choice of a career in childcare would not be unusual for men. Although the GenderEYE study has revealed flickers of change in this direction, a wider co-ordinated approach with clear and robust strategies is needed. Without this, the taken-for-granted nature of early childhood teaching will remain 'women's work'.

ETHICS APPROVAL STATEMENT

The research study was approved by Lancaster University Research Ethics Committee.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The quantitative data that support the findings of this study are available upon request from the corresponding author.

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