

Commentary Paper

The Men as Role Models Argument: A Case for Researching Children's Views

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Abstract

The theory that male teachers provide positive role models that can counter any negative male role models and compensate for the absence of men in children's lives is considered in this paper. The review is positioned in the European context where there have been consistent calls over the years for an increase in the number of male teachers. It highlights the dearth of literature that attempts to identify and include the voices of very young children within the debate on the inclusion of men in early years education. My early analysis of the literature and my own pilot study of primary aged children's views suggest the possibility that children may not necessarily agree with the gender role model idea. The paper argues that a way forward for research on teacher gender, and in particular on the role model argument, would be to include children's voices.

Key Words: Male teachers; role-model theory; children's views

Introduction

There is no debating that the early childhood profession is imbalanced along gender lines and that this imbalance needs to be addressed. The primary reason for addressing the imbalance is for gender equity; to make the occupation more representational of the distribution of men and woman in the community. In this paper I am not debating the presence of men (or women for that matter) in the early childhood profession. The purpose of this paper is to look at the literature surrounding a conventional and popular justification for having male teachers – to provide role models, and to argue that perhaps this justification is a weak one from the perspective of children.

Within the European context, there have been consistent calls for an increase in the number of men who work with young children. (Ashton et al 2002; BBC 2005a & 2005b; Cunningham & Watson 2002; Day Care Trust 2004; Department of Education Science and Training 2004; Equal Opportunities Commission 2005; Higgins 2002; McBride et al 2001; Mills et al 2004; Monkcom 2003). These calls have led to the establishment of many initiatives aimed specifically at increasing the number of men, ranging from advertising campaigns through to specific training courses being provided solely for men (BBC 2005a; Cameron 2004; Day Care Trust 2004; Department of Education Science and Training 2004; Equal Opportunities Commission 2005; Monkcom 2003; Owen 2003). However these initiatives have not been without their critics:

Significant questions are begged when being male is seen as a teaching speciality, when male elementary teachers are valued primarily as role models, and when "quality education" is defined as dependent upon the presence of male teachers. (Coulter & McNally, 1993, p. 399)

The role model argument is one that critics may be right to question; if only to relieve the tremendous social pressure on male teachers who must live up to such a responsibility. Despite the critics this particular purpose for having men working in early childhood services continues to be expressed in academic and popular discourses. There is, however, confusion as to what exactly the term 'male role model' means. Burn (2001) suggests that the notion of the male role model might have its origins in the common stereotype of the female early childhood teacher as a substitute mother. Given this stereotype the male teacher is then simply left with the role of substitute father by default. Popperell and Smeldley (1998) make the point that the concept of the role model, and its place within socialisation theory, while challenged in the academic discourse on gender, is used rather simplistically in what they termed the 'common-sense comment in the press' surrounding teacher recruitment. Five years later this confusion was still evident with Jones (2003) concluding that there needed to be greater clarity as to what is meant when referring to male role models in the context of men working with young children.

Taking a Closer Look at the Literature

Because of the relatively small number of men in the early childhood workforce what writing does exist would seem to be confounded by the same methodological constraints identified by Houde's (2002) review of the literature surrounding male nurses. Firstly it is limited by relatively small sample sizes and the prevalence of convenience sampling. The relative absence of male teachers in early childhood services makes it impossible to gain large sample groups, or randomly select subjects. Secondly there is a lack of any meaningful inclusion of clients [children's] voices within the writing. For example in their edited proceedings of a seminar on men as workers in services for young children, Owen et al. (1998) include 23 chapters, of which only one directly appears to take the child's perspective. This chapter entitled 'the child's perspective' (Lewis & Warin, 1998) however draws on literature surrounding fathers and their engagement with children, and family activities, to speculate on whether it makes any difference for children to interact with men in early years settings; it does not directly attempt to access the voices of young children.

In order to assess the engagement with young children's voices within the academic discourse on male early childhood teachers an interrogative review of the literature was carried out following the methodology of Houde (2002). To date, 265 references have been identified through the use of web based data sources (SAGE, ProQuest, ERIC, SCOPUS, SwetsWise, ScienceDirect, and Google) with the key words: 'male teacher', 'men teachers', 'men early childhood', 'kindergarten', 'preschool', 'elementary', and 'teachers. As the key word search becomes refined and the search engines expand further references will be identified, and these will be included in the review. The initial 265 references have been reduced to 166 after references that were not directly relevant to men who work in the early childhood area were discarded. The remaining references were then 'interrogated' for the theme of the 'male role models' and if, or how, children's voices are engaged with within the article.

The 166 references had different foci, and these reflected five distinct themes:

1. Reports of the number of men working within early childhood services and/or, policy support for increasing this number.
2. Reports of the experiences and beliefs of the males who work within the early childhood services.
3. Research into the attitudes and beliefs of teachers, and/or parents and the public about males who work within early childhood.

4. Investigations into the effects of the presence of males on child outcomes through changes in their observed behaviour or achievement.
5. Attempts to gain children views about males who work in early childhood services.

When looked at in this way 84% of the 166 references were found not to have children as the focus of enquiry (see Table 1). The majority of writing is focused on men’s experiences and the attitudes of other adults towards men working with children (70%). A further 14% concerned the number of men and policy initiatives.

Of the remaining 16% of articles, 13% (n = 22) of these attempted to measure the effect of a male teacher through observable outcomes, for example comparing children’s test score results as a measure of the success of the teaching, or looking at changes in children’s behaviour or choice of activities. Where differences were observed a link to the teacher’s gender was then suggested. Only four articles attempted to record the opinions or thoughts of children. Of these two gauged the opinions of children within centre settings, the other two sampled children of primary school age and did not concern early childhood services.

TABLE 1. Number and Percentage of References According to Theme

Theme	Number	%	%
Number of men	23	13.9	84
Experiences of men	64	38.6	
Attitudes to men	53	31.9	
Effect on children	22	13.3	16
Children’s opinions	4	02.4	

This quick analysis of what the literature has focused on highlights two large and concerning gaps; these are: the lack of evidence about how, or if, the presence of a male teacher alters the early childhood experience for children, and the lack of research on the views of children. Sumsion (2005) reported a similar pattern in the literature she reviewed, leading her to make the assertion that the calls for more males to be involved in the early childhood services are made on the back of assumption and rhetoric (see also Burn, 2001).

If we believe that children are competent and active participants in their development, we must include their voice within all discourses on their care and education. As highlighted by Birbeck and Drummond (2005) this is also a requirement of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), which explicitly states that children have a right to express themselves and participate in decisions that affect them. Within the male teacher debate, if we are basing the argument for more male teachers on a belief that they will act as role models for children, then it is vital to talk with children and find out if indeed they will be perceived as role models. The only way to test the assumption that males working within early childhood services will act as role models for children is to begin to include the voices of children within this discourse, Hughes (1988, cited in Gollop 2000) makes the point that:

The most obvious advantage of interviewing a child is that the child is the expert (the only expert) on his feelings, perceptions, and thoughts... . If an adult wants to know what or how the child is feeling or thinking, the adult must ask the child. (p. 18)

Children as young as three-years can provide important insights into their daily lives and experiences (Birbeck & Drummond 2005; Irwin & Johnson, 2005, Lamb & Brown 2006; Levy et al, 2000). But, children are often denied the right to speak for themselves either

because they are seen as being incompetent in making judgements or because they are thought of as unreliable witnesses about their own lives (Clark, 2004).

Recent writing in forensic psychology, specifically related to the interviewing of very young children who are victims of crime, has provided a possible framework for interviewing very young children. This research demonstrates the importance of the interview technique and how this might affect the child's ability to respond to the question asked. What is highlighted is that because young children are still developing their meta-linguistic ability and conceptual understandings, their capacity to respond to qualitative questioning is affected by the way in which the adult structures the question. For example young children find questions in the yes / no format problematic, and will attempt to answer the question even if they do not know the answer, because they are aware of the convention that these questions require an answer. Hughes and Grieve (1980) found that when asked nonsense questions 'Is milk bigger than water?' pre-school children commonly answered 'yes', rather than the correct 'I do not know'. Young children's responses to questions also demonstrated that they often assumed that the adult interviewer already had an understanding about what they were reporting and because of this the children refrained from reporting all they knew. Tang (2006) makes the distinction that if the child believes that the interviewer knows information already the child reminisces with them, however if they perceive the interviewer as ignorant they will recount what happened for the interviewer.

Tang (2006) refers to the effect of these meta-linguistic difficulties as 'language determined memory', in the same way children's ability to express their feeling and beliefs might also be 'language determined'. The onus is on adult interviewers to structure the interview process to support children in overcoming meta-linguistic difficulties. This might be by clearly communicating to children, for example that they are the experts and that the interviewer is completely naïve, asking questions in a forced choice format (Was it 'A' or 'B') rather than seeking yes / no answers, and stating that it is alright to answer with a 'I do not know'.

Sumsion's (2005) study looked at children's use of gender as a means of describing teachers within their stories and pictures. In an early childhood classroom where both a male and female teacher were present children were asked to draw and write stories about their teachers in different situations. The results showed that despite having a model of a male in a non-traditional role the children continued to use traditional gender role stereotypes in their drawing and writing about their teachers when those pictures and stories were based outside the school. Where the pictures and stories were based in the school the children used traditional teacher characteristics to describe them. This result problematises the notion that a male teacher would act as role model for children based solely on their gender.

A preliminary unpublished study (Williamson & Harty 2006) highlights one possible methodological approach to extend on Sumsion's work. A local holiday programme with children ranging in age from four to 12 years was chosen as the staff team included a male member of staff who had worked there consistently over a number of years. Children participating in the programme were asked to describe the characteristics of good teachers. This was achieved in two ways. First, children were asked to identify whom they felt would, or would not be a good teacher, and why they thought this, from a selection of photographs of well-known famous people who would be known to the children. Second, children were asked to draw pictures of someone who would or would not be a good teacher.

The results indicated that the children did not use gender as a salient descriptor. Rather they used information they could infer about the person's personality, or skills, from their previous knowledge of that person. For example children thought that David Beckham would be a good teacher because he is 'nice' and 'he can teach us football', while half

believed that he would not be a good teacher because 'he would be too busy playing football'. For all the personality photographs approximately half the children thought the person portrayed would be a good teacher and half thought they would not, there was no difference between boys and girls as to who they thought would be a good teacher. The results showed that positive aspects of a person's personality, for example being kind, happy and funny were important to children, they also considered having skills and knowledge to teach and pass on to children as a good quality. Qualities which the children most mentioned when talking about people they did not see as good teachers were being angry, being bossy and being lazy or too busy.

The only picture where a differentiation was made on the basis of gender was for one showing a male and female celebrity who present a morning television programme in the UK together. They were considered by the children as a single entity: "they would be good teachers." It was not until the children were asked to choose one of the two presenters that there was a preference shown. The boys were evenly divided as to whether they would choose the male or the female presenter; however, the majority of girls chose the female presenter.

When asked to draw teachers the children again referred to stereotyped personal characteristics, with equal numbers of male and female teachers being represented in both the good and not good teacher category, for both boys and girls. One of the most noticeable features was the use of facial expressions and colour (For an example see Figure 1). Many of the drawings of those who would be good teachers had large happy smiles while those who would not be good teachers had angry zig-zag mouths. Bright colours were used with the positive qualities of a good teacher and negative qualities were shown in dark colours.

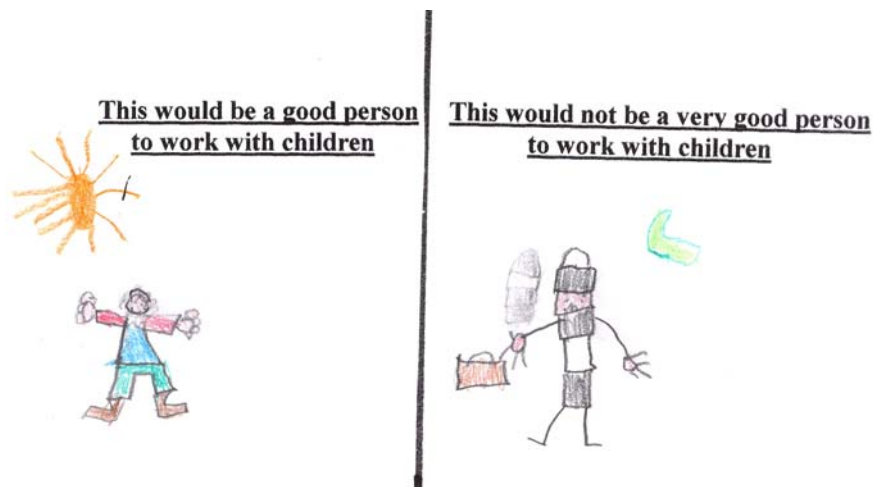


FIGURE 1: A Child's Representation of a 'Good' and 'Not Good' Person to Work with Children.

Williamson (2006) showed children a single photograph and asked if the person in the photo would be a good teacher - a 'yes' / 'no' format question. It is possible that this technique might have produced a high number of false hits as the children answered either 'yes' or 'no' even if they did not know the answer (Hughes & Grieve, 1980). When asked to justify their answer the children may have been forced to use information they could infer about the famous people in the photographs based on their pre-existing knowledge of them. Future research could use photographs of people not known to the children.

Although the Williamson and Harty (2006) is a small scale study with noted limitations, it does add to concerns expressed by Sumison (2005) as to whether a male teacher can act as role model for children based solely on their gender. Bandura (1969) suggested that observers tend to imitate modelled behaviour or values if they perceive similarities to themselves in the model, however if children, especially boys, are not using gender in their descriptions of their teachers it is difficult to argue that male teachers are acting specifically as role models for the boys. O'Brian et al (2000) reported that at 36 months of age boys were less able to label gender and less knowledgeable about gender roles than were girls; a result which when added to the current findings further confounds the 'male as a role model' assumption and suggests that much more research is needed particularly around role models for boys.

The direct questioning of children is a methodological approach that has been largely overlooked in research on men in early childhood services. As has been outlined in the area of forensic psychology research, young children can be valuable informants when conversing with interviewers who recognise their limitations and strengths and adapt their interviewing practices accordingly (Lamb & Brown 2006).

Conclusion

This paper has proposed that researchers' engage with children's voices as a way forward in investigating discourse on early childhood teacher gender and, in particular, the role model claim for male teachers. Despite there being a plethora of literature written on men as workers or teachers in early childhood services, the majority of writing has focused on adult perceptions and opinions. It is noted that there is a lack of quantifiable evidence on the effects on children of male teachers and an absence of engagement with the voices of children in research. Research thus stands unable to make much of a contribution to the popular debate about men being needed in early education services to provide positive masculine role models for children who have an absence of men or experience negative contacts with men in their lives.

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