Conceptualising the value of male practitioners in early childhood education and care: gender balance or gender flexibility.

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Introduction

The proportion of male staff in the early childhood education and care (ECEC) workforce remains persistently low across the globe with a pattern of between 1% and 3% in most countries (Drudy et al., 2005; Brody, 2014) with only three countries, Norway, Denmark and Turkey, managing over 5% (Peeters et al., 2015). However, there is currently a concerted call to transform the gendered make-up of the ECEC workforce and raise the number of men. This is coming from both practitioners and academics, sometimes working together, in the UK and in many other European countries. For example, the first national UK conference 'Men in the Early Years' took place in 2016 to promote the increase of men in the early childhood sector. A special interest group of European early childhood researchers has become well established in recent years, within the European Early Childhood Education Research Association (EECERA) with the aim of raising the proportion of male workers in ECEC. Members of the group have collaborated in a recent special issue of the European Early Childhood Education Research Journal (EECERJ) devoted to this topic (Rohrmann and Emilsen, 2015). There is clearly a growing desire to see workforce transformation. However, the underlying rationales for this desired change vary considerably and it now seems timely to examine what these are. In doing so we may gain greater insight into understanding why the gendered workforce pattern remains so persistent.

Analysis of the relevant literature throws up a repeated and prevalent argument for 'gender balance', perceived to be the desirable outcome of many initiatives aimed at the recruitment and retention of male staff. The aim of this paper is to take a critical look at this concept and at the policies and practices that it leads to in ECEC. In particular, the paper will demonstrate that the concept can actually pose a threat to the potential transformation of gender within early childhood education. An alternative rationale is based on the concept of 'gender flexibility', which not only implies a flexible approach to the performance of gender, but which can also inform the all-important pedagogic relationship between ECEC professionals and young children. It incorporates ideas about the resources and activities that young children themselves may be encouraged to engage in, with an emphasis on playful and experimental approaches to the performance of gender (Warin and Adriany, 2015). The paper will argue that this idea has much greater potential for gender transformation of the ECEC workforce.

Theoretical background on gender balance and gender flexibility as conceptual foci for justifying more men in ECEC

The concept of gender balance within debates about the need for 'more men' is open to a range of interpretations and can be used to signify widely different approaches and policies. Sometimes, as this paper will show, these come from quite radically different theoretical starting points and with very different endpoints in mind. For example, the European Special Interest Group mentioned above shares goals for gender transformation as part of a more gender equal society and many are researching in countries that have already

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established a basis for gender egalitarian social policies. In this context 'gender balance' is a short hand term that indicates the desired outcome that ECEC staff teams should have an equal number of men and women. However, gender balance can also be a term that supports gender essentialism and implies that men, performing in masculine ways, are required to complement women, performing in feminine ways.

Within a gender essentialist approach arguments for a gender balanced workforce are derived from heteronormative assumptions. In particular there is an influential assumption about the complementary nature of maternal and paternal roles in traditional heterosexual families. At the turn of the millennium sociologists of the family showed us that the traditional two-parent heterosexual family was articulated as a strong and prevalent ideal by participants in family-focused research (Silva and Smart, 1998; Smart and Neale, 1999). They also showed us that this ideal brought about parenting efforts to construct and 'do' the family (Morgan, 1998). My own contribution to this research (Warin et al, 1999) revealed a reification of the traditional two-parent heterosexual norm in response to research questions with male and female parents and their teenaged sons and daughters about the value they attached to being in a family. This value was reinforced through the articulation of assumptions about the complementarity of gender roles within the family. Our analysis showed a range of gender stereotypical fathering identities that were described by fathers, mothers and their 11- 16 year old sons and daughters. Of these, the most frequently mentioned identities were: disciplinarian; spectator and participant in sports activities; playfellow and joker, in addition to the family-based identities of provider, and protector. Deeply held gender stereotypes are alive and well, continuous across both the institutions of family and pre-school. This should

come as no surprise given that both types of social group foster a psycho-social process of implicit gender comparison which reproduces gender stereotypes through a polarisation of masculinities and femininities. Golombok's research (2000) challenges the heteronormative construction of the family and raises critical questions about parenting and the gendered nature of family life. She asks the all-important question about the advantages and disadvantages of father presence and absence: how far does 'maleness' matter in parenting?

It is interesting to read this work in the light of 'gender balance' arguments in ECEC settings and the very similar questions that are asked in this context about the presence and absence of male teachers. In the 1990s and early part of the millennium, much research on fathers was focused on levels of paternal involvement; the *quantity* of time spent in childcare (Lindberg et al., 2016; Cabrera et al., 2014; Lamb, 2010). Then researchers moved to a concern with the quality of fathering practices emphasising that it what fathers *do* when they are present that makes a difference to outcomes for children (Lamb, 2010; Parke and Brott; 1999; Honig; 2009). This line of enquiry raised questions about specifically male contributions to family life. Golombok, together with her colleague Tasker (1997) has shown that there are no adverse outcomes for children brought up in lesbian headed families with two same sex female parents. She concludes that it is not fathers' maleness that matters but their role as an *additional* parent.

However, despite this research, there is strong evidence in the UK of a popular heterosexist view of the family expressed within the public discourse about the impact of absent fathers. For example, in August 2011 there was a spate of riots by young people mainly of school age in urban locations throughout England. Prime Minister, David Cameron, pointed the finger at '*dysfunctional families*' and argued that the rioting was linked to *'…Children without fathers'* (Gov.UK, 2011). In parallel with the discourse about absent fathers is a related view about the damage caused by feckless fathers, seen to be another cause of our supposedly broken society. A plea for more men in ECEC has been rationalised in relation to this discourse as a way of providing father figures to civilise children, especially boys, to prevent societal breakdown. It has also been seen as a way to help boys academically given the moral panic about an increasing academic gender gap between boys and girls. The discourse of boys' 'under-achievement' has been heavily criticised by feminists and other writers across the globe (see Drudy, 2008, for an overview of the debate). Critics have emphasised that initiatives designed to improve boys' academic achievement, such as the provision of 'male role models', operate as a *re-gendering* of society rather than a *de-gendering* and contribute to a backlash against gender equality (Martino and Rezai Rashti, 2012). A *re-gendering* of society emphasises the assertion of a traditional gender binary whilst a *de-gendering* of society implies moving beyond this. In ECEC *all* staff are expected to provide positive role models as part of their pedagogy of care and education, as identified in the current Teachers' Standards for Early Years, (National College of Teaching and Leadership, 2017) . However, the idea of the specifically *male* role model contains implicit and often very explicit implications about a value for children to see men behaving in traditionally masculine ways. This idea clearly belongs to the backlash against gender transformation, and emphasises the gender binary.

Schools and nurseries can and do aim to provide models of valued adult behaviours, as Dewey expressed (1959) in his ideal of the school as a 'miniature community, and embryonic society'(p18). Some leaders of nurseries and Children's Centres specifically aim to create a staff team that represents the diversity that exists within the setting's wider community. For example, Broadhead and Meleady (2008) wrote about the challenges they faced within Sheffield Children's Centre in recruiting and retaining staff. They adopted an intersectional approach (Crenshaw, 1989; Cristensen and Jensen, 2014) aiming for the staff team to represent both the gender composition and ethnic diversity of its community. A current example of intersectional awareness in recruiting male workers is in a centre in Bradford, England, based on the children's centre model pioneered during the years of the Sure Start initiative. It has a diverse staff which is not only 'gender balanced' but includes a representation of the religious and racial and cultural groups who live around it. Here we have a rather more sophisticated form of what we might mean by a balanced workforce, in which gender balance is an element of an overall value for diversity.

Some researchers have pointed out that the inclusion of more men in the ECEC workforce can actually result in more gender stereotypical behaviour unless there are opportunities for gender-sensitive reflection (Cremers et al., 2012). Indeed the research on men in early childhood settings contains many examples of pedagogic practices in which men and women are positioned as different in the contributions they bring to the nursery environment and their interactions

with the children. For example US research by Mallozzi and Campbell Galman (2016) shows how assumptions about the men's superior physical strength led to a divergence of traditionally male and female practices, with men being positioned as disciplinarians, linked to military roles. Similarly Simon Pratt-Adams (Burn and Pratt-Adams, 2015) provides an autobiographical account of the way he was also expected to be a 'good disciplinarian' (p4). Others emphasise men's distinctive contribution to outdoor learning and to sports specialism.

Instead of aiming to achieve 'gender balance' with its hints at gender complementarity and a gendered division of labour, I argue that a concept of gender flexibility is more gender-transformative. Theoretically, the concept of gender flexibility can be contextualised within a feminist poststructuralist approach. Poststructuralist approaches emphasise that selves are multiple and are context dependent, in contrast with a biological essentialist or cognitive essentialist understandings of identity which portray a fixed self. Poststructuralists argue that identities are fluid and ever-changing because they are influenced continuously by relationships with others (Davies and Harre, 1990; Gergen, 1991; Kearney, 2003). With regard to gender this view emphasises 'the fluid and flexible aspects of practising gender' (Tennhoff et al., 2015, p 343).

This recognition of the way that identity adapts to different social and cultural contexts is closely aligned with Butler's ideas about identity as 'performative', together with the concept of 'doing gender' originally conceptualised by West

and Zimmerman (1987) who portrayed gender as an everyday, recurring accomplishment created through interactions with others. They theorised that gender emerges from social situations 'as an outcome of and a rationale for various social arrangements and as a means of legitimating one of the most fundamental divisions of society'(p126). Doing gender is situated and is always carried out in the actual or virtual presence of others. They draw on Cahill's sociological research in pre-school (for example Cahill,1986) to show how an essentialist understanding of male and female natures operates as pre-schoolers are 'recruited' to gender identities. This body of work in the 1980s marked a significant departure from the gender essentialist assumption that gender is located within the individual. Butler's concept of performativity similarly challenges gender as a fixed identity and uncouples gender from sex. She says: 'when the constructed status of gender is theorised as radically independent of sex, gender itself becomes a free-floating artifice, with the consequence that *man* and *masculine* might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and *woman* and *feminine* a male body as easily as a female one' (Butler, 1990 p6). This is a radical idea to apply, for example, to debates about proportions of male and female teachers in ECEC staff teams where potentially we could understand gender as a 'free-floating artifice' where an individual's gender performance depends on what options are available to them and how they are positioned by others. It is consistent with a playful, experimental and adventurous approach to the intersection of gender and pedagogy.

The paper now moves on to apply this theoretical discussion to data drawn from a case study of one English ECEC setting, Acorns nursery (fictional name), in order to open up the concepts of gender balance and gender flexibility. These two analytical concepts will now be used as theoretical lenses through which to

view the perspectives of the ECEC staff in this nursery regarding their value for an increase in male practitioners.

Methodology in the case study of Acorns nursery.

This case study was funded by a private nursery provider who manage approximately fifty nurseries (ECEC settings) in the UK. One of these, Acorns, had a rather unusually high proportion of male practitioners with a total of five amongst an overall classroom staff of twenty six (including full and part timers). The funders met the author at a conference and expressed their interest in discovering what impact, if any, could be discerned from this unusual gender composition of the nursery's workforce. Acorns is subdivided into four different age units: infants; two year olds; three year olds; four year olds. At the time of undertaking the study four full-time male workers were deployed across the three and four-year-old age groups with a fifth man working part-time in the three year old room. The funder explained that the recruitment of a larger than average number of men had occurred fortuitously rather than through any specific policy of positive discrimination in favour of male applicants. Indeed the consistency of 'the best person for the job' policy was evidenced during the research period in a round of promotional interviews when one of the male practitioners was rejected in favour of a female colleague for promotion to classroom leader. However, it seems very plausible that men are attracted to a nursery that already has a good proportion of men (Johannesen, 2010) as they

are less likely to experience the vulnerabilities of being in a complete minority (Sumsion, 2010 ; Warin, 2006*;* Burn and Pratt-Adams, 2016).

The aim of the case study, negotiated with the funder, was to view what impact, if any, could be discerned regarding the presence of the men. We agreed on a composite interpretation of impact which incorporated subject, type and timescale. We considered the subject of the male staff presence: the children, their parents, families, and wider communities, as well as the impact the men have on each other and their female colleagues and managers. We also considered different kinds of impact: educational, emotional, social. In addition, we took account of impact timescales: immediate, short-term and long-term. Given these aims we chose to conduct a case study over several visits using a variety of data collection methods detailed below. In the following account all names have been fictionalised.

Two researchers, one female (the author) and one male, visited the pre-school during July and August 2016 spending 8 whole days of researcher time on site. We undertook two focus groups, one with the five male staff and one with a mixed group of six practitioners, selected according to availability at the allocated time, including a representation of the nursery's different age groups. The focus groups lasted for approximately eighty minutes. We also undertook a range of one-to-one interviews (12 overall) with various members of staff within the nursery including the two managers (both female) the five male practitioners and five female practitioners who were selected on the basis of

their availability.   Interviews lasted for between forty minutes and one hour. Both the focus groups and the interviews employed a semi-structured schedule of prompt questions in order to enable to researchers to gain good coverage of relevant topics such as trajectories into ECEC work, sources of job satisfaction, relationships with nursery children's parents. Focus groups and interviews were audio recorded and transcribed.

We also conducted observations. Observational methods have been neglected with regard to developing research on the pedagogical activities of female and male ECEC workers (Brandes et al., 2015). We observed both female and male practitioners interacting with children and colleagues as well as with parents/carers at 'drop off' and 'pick up' handover times. We spent more time observing in the two older age group rooms where the male practitioners were deployed. We also made a record (photos and notes) of the nursery environment, including posters, wall displays, toys and artefacts. Our observations used a field notes method of recording (Emerson, Fretz and Shaw, 1995) with the two researchers noting their comments in reflective logbooks, which then also provided material for discussion in interviews as well as the informal conversations that occur 'in passing'. We also undertook an analysis of some of the nursery's documents including their pedagogic recording tool which charts children's development and also the provider's policies/procedures manual for staff to promote positive behaviour. In addition we consulted the current Early Years Foundation Stage Statutory Framework (DfE, 2014). We also used Email to communicate with parents of children in the nursery requesting responses about perceived advantages (if any) of having male practitioners in the nursery, and receiving seven responses.

It proved to be indispensable to have a method of triangulating the data from different sources within the case study. This can be exemplified with regard to the controversial claim by one of the more senior male practitioners that the men had a particular impact with regard to children's physical development. Craig claimed, in response to a question about the influence of male practitioners, that the children in the pre-school class (3-4 year olds) '*shoot up with regard to their physical development and risk-taking, their motor skills'*. Our methodology enabled us to compare data from observations, data from interviews and focus groups and also from our analysis of the nursery's recording documentation to see how far we could find supporting evidence for this claim, looking within the cohort tracking system as well as in the comments made by male and female staff. We looked closely at the nursery's child-progress recording tool but we could not see any decisive evidence to suggest that children's physical development had somehow been escalated through the involvement of male practitioners. However, what we quite clearly noted was the prevalent perception that the men had a very special enthusiasm for engaging in physical play with children especially in the outdoor environment, as this view occurred across the data (for example in interviews with the two female managers, in interviews with practitioners; Steve, Chris, Jen, Craig and Ben, and in both focus groups).

At the heart of our methodological approach was an ethical concern that all our participants would benefit from being involved. The interviews were dialogic and reciprocal (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995) creating learning opportunities for

all the parties. They were driven by the researcher's intention to gain insight into the gender awareness (or gender blindness) of Acorns staff in tandem with their own agendas within the broad topic of gender concerns. The ethical aspects of the study were approved through our University's Ethics Committee. We were particularly aware of previous research that emphasises how researcher gender can influence data collection and analysis since Oakley (1981) first drew attention to the 'insider' effect of women interviewing women. For example Rohrmann and Brody, (2015) are critical of empirical gender research that does not include explicit self-reflection on gender bias. The research team who undertook this study included one female researcher (the author) and one male researcher.

Data was analysed using constructivist grounded theory based on the method presented by Charmaz (2006) which advocates a principle of openness to the data and a method of constant comparison. We compared data within our different data types (interview transcripts, focus group transcripts, field notes, documents) and then we compared across data types. We identified the following working codes: staff as family; gender balance; job satisfaction; positive parental responses; bonding with dads; suspicious parental responses; physical play; diversity, gender awareness/blindness; child-centred ethic; embodiment; salary, ambition; professionalism; men supporting men; recruitment; retention; challenges to children's gender stereotypes. These were developed, through a further process of data comparison into a thematic hierarchy with five over-arching themes: gender balance; gender flexibility; gender sensitivity; socio-political aspects; pedagogy.

The aim of the case study, negotiated with Childbase Partnership, was to produce findings about impacts of the men's presence. Our final report to the funders drew attention to positive impacts such as: workforce morale, parental appreciation of male workers; men's enthusiasm for physical play, recognition of gender diversity; challenges to children's gender stereotypes. We also reported on incidences of gender blindness. We arrived at overall conclusions about the nursery's retention of its male workers, noting the efforts made by the two female managers to retain a consistent staff team through the provision of training opportunities and through the provision of the strong protection afforded to the men in rare but very discomforting instances of parental suspicion.

In the next section the paper moves on to look at findings that relate specifically to the concept of 'gender balance', in line with this paper's aim to take a critical look at this concept. I will then argue for an alternative rationale for men's inclusion in the Early Years workforce that is based on the concept of 'gender-flexibility'.

Findings

Perceptions about the value of gender balance

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Our very first impression of Acorns, as we entered the main reception area, was a large noticeboard depicting the photographs of all the staff under a banner that read 'Acorns Family'. This strong visual impression was reinforced in interviews with both managers who emphasised their efforts to create 'a family feel' within their team and it was corroborated in the focus groups and interviews with practitioners. An ideal of the cohesive and motivated workforce was associated with ideas about the collaboration of male and female practitioners. In this respect there were echoes of the sociological studies, discussed above, that reveal the idealisation of the heterosexual family.

Whilst we did not encounter the very clear pattern of a traditional gendered division of labour within the nursery that some other researchers have presented (for example Mallozzi and Campbell Galman, 2016), we certainly came across assumptions, based on essentialized gender differences, about the ways that men and women complement each other through the different qualities they bring to their work. We were struck by the following comment made in the male focus group:

> *I predominantly enjoy working with other men in this nursery. You get a level of banter when you're working with other men. I don't mind working with the women too. It's always nice to come into work and have something nice to look at…*

This comment came across as a provocative testing of the researchers who led the focus group, especially as it was one of the first contributions.

Both male and female practitioners laid much emphasis on the men's value in creating a relaxed and often fun, atmosphere which seemed to be linked to strong statements about job satisfaction. Comments about the men's capacity to 'lighten the mood' (Jen) and provide humour were made specifically by Fran (twice in her interview), Jen, Ben, the two managers and in both focus groups. For example Jen felt that men brought '*Lots of fun. They are a lot of fun. They've got so much energy. They bring a lot of energy and motivation into the room*'. Her comment implies both a lively energetic pedagogy as well as good relations amongst co-workers. She also pointed out that her male colleagues were '*easy to talk to*' and went as far as to say that '*without males in here the atmosphere would change quite drastically. They do tend to sort of liven things up*'. Becky expressed the idea of balance as a form of diversity that can be gained from having men and women working in the same place:

> *In our room we've got three males and like four females, I think a nice balance does work really well. You can have different conversations with people and it's just a nice atmosphere to work in.*

Her attempt to elaborate 'nice balance' emphasises the value of *variety* of interaction. As we will see, a value for variety within the job was articulated as a source of job satisfaction for the men.   These views resonate with research that finds enjoyment of staff banter in mixed gender teams (Burn and Pratt-Adams 2015) and that women welcome men as co-workers (Cremers et al., 2010 cited in Koch and Farquhar, 2015).

However, some of these positive views on the balance of the mixed gender workforce are based on implicit comparisons between men's male qualities and women's female qualities. These views reinforce the idea of gender complementarity and emphasize gender difference An arresting view was that women on their own can be 'niggly' with each other (stated by Adam in the male-only focus group) and 'bitchy' (interview with Katya). We met this in various forms, expressed by both male and female practitioners. For example Ben said he felt that the male practitioners had the capacity to '*get over stuff much quicker*'. Fran said '*they tend to be more laid-back*' and they don't '*take stuff to heart as much*'. She also said:

> *I don't know if that's all men in childcare, but the ones that we've got here have all got such a kind of laugh, like, laughy jokey kind of personality… they just don't get kind of caught up in the personal stuff ….*

We also met the implicit idea of gender complementarity in explicit comparisons with family gender roles. Adam told us that children need to have both the male influence and the female influence in their lives to replicate the traditional family gender pattern: '*It is nice to have them both in here..Daddy..Mummy*'. Craig reported that having a mixed gender workforce was important because '*you just need that balance*'.

A parent used the term 'balance' to describe her positive response to the men's presence in the nursery. She implied that the presence of the men creates a

greater range of opportunities for her daughter and this is what matters rather than the co-presence of male and female workers per se

> *It is in fact positive that she* [daughter] *sees that men are carers and teachers as well as women. As a parent I know that my daughter picks up on stereotypes very easily, and with Ben* [her key worker) *I note that she is a princess and a pirate. Balance is important.*

This parent's emphasis is on balance at the intrapersonal level. She suggests an idea of balance in the sense of keeping equilibrium between two different gender stereotype roles often used in young children's roleplay and implies a need for her daughter to alternate between them. Her use of balance here is more in keeping with the idea of gender flexibility which the paper now moves on to discuss, with examples from the data.

An alternative rationale: The versatile ECEC practitioner and the principle of gender flexibility

Steve did not emphasise gender balance in quite the same way as some of his colleagues. Instead he had a rather more sophisticated view of the impact of male practitioners. He stressed the fact that staff often have to take over from each other and therefore need to be multi-skilled and have multiple roles. His value for the professional skill of role versatility was interlinked with his value for child-centric individualised learning. In this respect he typified all the staff in the nursery as this ethic was expressed frequently. Steve told us that each practitioner needs to develop both fatherly and motherly skills.

> *You can't be too stereotypical towards your own gender. It just doesn't work. You can't be the masculine man. You can't be the feminine woman.*

Neither of them would work in this situation… It's aspects of both. It gets combined… Being a mother and father at the same time. You have to be able to do both. You can't rely on someone else to be the other half or anything because the same person wouldn't always be there. None of us work alone here. You've got to be able to switch'.

Steve implies that a restricted idea of gender roles could actually prevent ECEC practitioners from using the flexible range of skills that are needed for as a pedagogue with young children. His comment suggests that versatility and flexibility are essential qualities for the ECEC practitioner. Adam says something very similar, emphasising the ECEC practitioner's range of skills and practices.

We're a jack of all trades, we are versatile, we can do everything from nappy changing, running, playing, teaching science. We know all the areas.

A very relevant remark was made by the HR manager of the nursery provider (Alice), in an informal conversation at the start of the research: 'Each practitioner should reflect the whole curriculum in themselves'.

For Ben the ECEC practitioners' versatility is linked to the need to be child-centred as he expressed in response to a question about the value of being a 'father figure', an idea he rejected:

I could be any figure they needed me to be. It's all on the children. But if a certain child just needs that extra person to bond with and have the rough and tumble time and play football, then I'm more than happy to give it. But more than happy to give cuddles as well and read stories.

Ben implies that the ECEC practitioner is a chameleon like figure who will change colour according to the child's lead. In this respect his pedagogy is clearly aligned with a key principle of ECEC practice which emphasises personalised learning and is enshrined in the Early Years Foundation Stage. Steve for example expressed this principle strongly suggesting that nursery staff should '*never pull* [a child] *away from what they want to do if they really want to*'. The emphasis on children's individual needs and interests was evident in many ways. For example the central noticeboard display of the children's individual plans and profiles, available to all practitioners, was harnessed to engage each child in learning activities, distract unsettled children and match children with their key workers.

This child-centred ideal was frequently expressed in a particular phrase that resonated throughout the data, '*Be who you want to be*', a phrase that is currently ubiquitous in children's popular culture such as Disney films and the lyrics to the Barbie song (Aqua, 1997). The strength and pervasiveness of this idea is disturbing because it perpetuates an ideal of the neoliberal free-choosing self (Skeggs, 2004) which promotes an individualist ethic and which is blind to structural constraints (Warin, 2010). However, whilst this ethic is problematic it was also associated in our data with a value for diversity in general and positive views about gender diversity in particular.

For example Chris, commenting about the girls' fascination for the film '*Frozen*' talks about trying to '*open their minds*' so they can '*be who you want to be*'. He describes the children's tendencies to reproduce gender stereotypes,

'cos if there's a girl, say, like on the odd occasion they might say "Oh Frozen's just for girls" or they might say "You can't be Elsa cos you're a boy"'. On these occasions, Chris explains, he tells the boys *"you can still be a princess"* Like Ben and Chris, Steve also linked this idea to gender and the children's exposure to both male and female staff:

> *You've got the other gender as well so it is helping children. They can choose. We have both kinds of role models for them so they can feel more confident to be whatever they want to be… It's not necessarily the boys will gravitate towards men… It means that there is more of, more opportunity for diversity of role model*

The word 'diversity', emphasised here by Steve, was used frequently in our conversations. The practitioners often made the link between a principle of gender diversity and other forms of diversity. Steve discussed it further:

> *We are trying to get the children to grow up to be upstanding members of the community, good citizens …so challenging stereotypes and showing that not everyone is a certain way is really really useful. And it works really well here because we have really diverse children like all the children come from different areas… So we've got various different cultures, various different skin colours ..and along with the fact that we have men and women, different cultures … So it's seeing all of that diversity. Children growing up with it.*

Most practitioners, female and male, articulated their awareness of the diversity policies of the nursery as a whole and also emphasised a respect for diversity as

a target for children's learning within the Promoting Positive Behaviour Policy within the Early Years Foundation Stage Statutory Framework. Katya (female) suggested that staff should be watchful of portraying gender stereotyping in exactly the same way they would take care over ethnic diversity. Craig pointed out that it is important to have a mixed gender workforce because it represents the wider society '*because society is mixed gender*'. He said:

> *There's a big world out there and it's full of different ages, genders, races and all the rest of it. They need to experience that. ..it makes a big difference with the children long-term.*

Ben explained how his awareness of gender-diversity allowed him the opportunity to demonstrate this principle with children, as the following account illustrates.

> *We got all these fabrics out and I started dressing up like a pirate. And then I put a flower in my hair as well and all the children said "Pirates don't have flowers" and I said, "Well this one does". "Boys aren't allowed to wear flowers". "Well this one does". Or the other day I was Rapunzel and they all plaited the back of my hair…they're seeing the both sides of what everyone can do.*

Ben's repeated use of the term '*Well this one does*' to refer to his own behaviour emphasises his commitment to assert his right to individual difference and embodies the '*be who you want to be*' ethic. This value was intertwined with an emphasis on variety and versatility as a source of their job satisfaction. For example '*I work here because every day is different and I can be whoever I want to be*' (Ben). This emotional response to the work of ECEC

echoed findings from my interviews with Swedish male pre-school staff (*reference removed for peer review purposes*) who made frequent use of the term 'freedom' to justify their choice to teach and care for younger rather than older children. The response from both the Acorns staff and the Swedish men asserts the principle they respond to in their goals for the children: Be whoever you want to be. The versatility of the ECEC practitioner may be the carrot to recruit men, highlighting the multiplicity of the work (Wohlgemuth, 2015).

Discussion

This paper has argued that if we are to witness gender transformation in the ECEC workforce then gender balance needs to be interpreted as a capacity for gender flexibility and not gender complementarity. To what extent have the various participants in this study used the concept of gender balance to rationalise a value for an increase of more men in ECEC? To what extent have they moved away from gender binary thinking to embrace gender flexibility as a concept governing their pedagogy including what and how they teach young children?

We have seen that whilst staff, on the whole, did not have strong gender-transformative motives they often challenged children's gender stereotypes because they wanted to give children more equality of opportunity, to 'be who you want to be'. It was particularly interesting to see how this strong value was articulated by nursery practitioners in relation to their own identities as well as to the children's. It was articulated both as an ethic of individual identity choice performed in men's roles in ECEC and also as a principle governing their

pedagogy. There is potential for building on this well-established value for versatility and developing a stronger ethic of gender flexibility.

Given their own minority status as men in the nursery it could be expected that these practitioners would be particularly attuned to gender issues. At the same time, their presence might also provoke gender awareness in their female colleagues too. We found that *some* of the men articulated an ethic and approach for gender flexibility *some* of the time. There were promising, potentially gender transformative, instances in our data of staff modeling a flexible approach to the performance of gender. In line with Butler's approach these performances challenge and disrupt prescriptions for men to model masculinities and women to model femininities (Warin and Adriany, 2015) However, our data also contains clear instances of sexism and views that are quite clearly counter-productive . On occasions we witnessed a disappointing continuation of certain gender stereotypical practices. For example we were disappointed to hear that '*the Mummies on the bus go chatter chatter chatter*' in the well-known song 'The Wheels on the Bus' .

Overall, across our data, we found a mix of gender sensitivity co-existing alongside gender blindness (Hogan, 2012), a term that is defined in the European Commission glossary of gender equality to mean 'the failure to recognise that gender is an essential determinant of social outcomes impacting on projects and policies'(http://ec.europa.eu/justice/gender-equality/glossary/index_en.htm). It implies a need for gender awareness.

Our findings from this case study led to recommendations for this particular nursery to build on the developing gender awareness of some of the male and

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female practitioners. The presence of five male practitioners in the nursery means that it is in a strong position to develop a special sensitivity to gender issues. It could harness the presence of the male practitioners to develop and build on emerging expertise in helping children challenge the strong gender stereotyping messages that they are subject to within the wider world.

Strategies for strengthening the concept of gender flexibility as a script for promoting more men in ECEC.

Our findings have shown that gender-flexible teaching can only be practiced by teachers who are gender-aware rather than gender blind. They suggest a need to develop a gender-conscious pedagogy with ECEC practitioners (Eidevald and Lenz Taguchi, 2011) that goes beyond traditional gendered notions (Peeters et al., 2015 p8). ECEC practitioners must learn to recognize the subtle and often invisible ways that traditional gender norms can persist within the power plays of the school and they must be alert to possibilities for gender flexibility and transformation. A gender-flexible pedagogy will also provide support for transgender children who are becoming increasingly visible. Gender-aware practitioners are much more likely to respond sensitively to the various ways that young children express gender (Taylor and Price, 2016; Rahilly, 2015; Meadow, 2011).

These conclusions have implications for initial training, mentoring and continuing development of ECEC practitioners. Mistry and Sood (2013) emphasize the importance of mentoring for male trainees entering the ECEC profession, a strategy that is linked to the rise of single sex, male, support

groups. At the present time, gender sensitisation is occurring implicitly within such groups which are set up in some institutions to bolster men's progress through training. Thornton reported on the 'Men's Club' strategy she set up in one English teacher training institution in 1997 (Thornton and Bricheno 2006) and more recently Burn, (in Burn and Pratt-Adams, 2016) describes how she started a male only group to support her trainees doing a Bachelors of Education in primary teaching and to prevent dropout . This strategy can be a very helpful way for any minority group to develop much needed emotional support when they experience the feeling of being 'othered' by the majority. This is the principal behind the newly emerging UK support groups for male practitioners in ECEC, for example in the cities of Bristol and Bradford in England. However, single sex support groups have the potential to reproduce arguments for more men that are based on gender essentialism and that serve to reinforce gender differences with a re-gendering impact. At a recent (2016) meeting of European ECEC gender balance researchers (EECERA Special Interest Group in Gender Balance) the conclusion was reached that single sex groups should co-exist alongside mixed sex groups for training on gender sensitisation.   This view is supported by Burn and Pratt-Adams (2016), who also recommend that male support groups should be led by both a male and female tutor. They also suggest that gender sensitisation should occur as part of broader training in equity and diversity with an intersectional approach to develop students understanding of the experiences of minority groups and the psycho-social processes of othering. However, specific training in gender sensitisation is still rare in most initial teacher training courses (Drudy, 2008). We need to develop pre-service training and in-service support to develop the gender-aware ECEC professional with a capacity for gender flexibility.

Conclusion: the possibility of gender transformation in ECEC

We have seen that the concept of gender balance is interpreted in rather different ways across the data. Sometimes it is used to reinforce traditional gender roles when it is used to indicate that men and women are complementary to each other in a mixed gender staff. However, the data have also shown the practitioners' beliefs and openness to the interchangeability of gender roles in a gender-flexible way that brings Butler's words to mind that gender can be understood as 'free-floating artifice'. A value for flexibility and versatility was expressed overall by the practitioners in this case study as something that was intrinsically enjoyable within their work and a key pedagogic value that informed practice and goals for children too. This value is linked to the strong child-centred discourse present in this nursery as in most ECEC settings and is also connected to curriculum goals about developing children's respect for diversity.

I have argued here, on the basis of data from Acorns nursery that the concept of gender flexibility could and should provide the theoretical platform for the recruitment and retention of more men in early childhood education and care. Gender flexibility is preferable to gender balance as the rationale for recruiting, training and retaining more men in the ECEC workforce. The concept of gender balance often, implicitly, draws on an ideal of adult complementary gender roles within the nuclear family (usually assumed to be heterosexual). It suggests a value for having both a masculine and a feminine contribution, side by side, in the care and education of children in pre-school. It stresses gender difference and could be seen to bolster the reproduction of traditional gender roles and stereotypes with an encouragement for men to behave as father figures and women as mother figures, with roles and identities of male and practitioners

being positioned against each other. So it can lead us into a reinforcement of essentialist approaches to male and female attributes.

This paper makes a specific knowledge contribution in so far as it argues that the inclusion of more men in the ECEC workforce has the potential to challenge gender essentialism but demonstrates that this potential is not simply achieved by recruiting more men. It can only be achieved through the development of gender-sensitivity and the deliberate construction of a gender-flexible pedagogy.

In order to achieve gender equality it is necessary for learners to witness men in roles with young children. However, this can only occur if the male teacher and his female colleagues are dedicated to upholding equity and de-gendering society. Otherwise they may find they are inadvertently contributing to a re-gendering of society.

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