Men Times Ten: Does the presence of more men support inclusion of male educators in early childhood education and care?

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Retention rates for men in early childhood education and care (ECEC) are low. Exit is associated with experience of feeling 'other' perpetuated by judgements of men's sexuality, motives, and ability. In this paper, we take the unique circumstance of many men working together in ECEC to ask whether more men on staff improves experiences of inclusion. We analyse interviews with 10 men working in two Australian ECEC centres in which male educators comprise >20%, of the staff; ten times the international representation of men in the ECEC workforce. Our data identify a developmental process in which supports and mentorship, from female and male colleagues, are critical to retention early in career. Beyond, the building of a distinct male contribution underpins continuing career engagement. However, with the presence of more men new tensions emerge as the 'alien invader' becomes the face of the centre, potentially eclipsing the contribution of female colleagues.

Keywords: early childhood; occupational sex segregation; childcare; workforce; diversity

Introduction

Internationally there is a crisis of labour supply in the early childhood education and care (ECEC) workforce. A convergence of increased demand for ECEC services and growing demands for educator training and accountability, set against static and incommensurate pay and conditions (McDonald et al., 2018; Warin, Ljunggren, et al., 2021) and high rates of staff turnover (Thorpe, Jansen, et al., 2020; Totenhagen et al., 2016; Whitebook et al., 2014) have generated this crisis. Current policy assessments (OECD, 2019; UNICEF, 2019) suggest this problem will endure without critical intervention and have directed attention to the participation of men in the ECEC workforce. While theoretical arguments for men' participation in ECEC have focused on principles of gender equity (Olsen & Smeplass, 2016; Rohrmann, 2020; Warin, 2019), gender role-modelling (Brownhill et al., 2021; Martino & Rezai-Rashti, 2010; Wood & Brownhill, 2018) or as a catalyst for professional recognition (Northey, 2022; Wernersson, 2015), the practical necessity of a labour supply crisis has refocused and intensified concern to increase recruitment of men. Indeed, engaging men in the ECEC workforce is one of nine recommendations made by the OECD (2019) as a response strategy to this crisis. Yet, while focussing on methods to attract men into the ECEC workforce, this report is notably silent in considering the potential for disruption within the workplace and the attendant requirements for support.

Internationally, the participation of men in ECEC remains persistently low with an average rate of 2.5% across OECD countries (OECD, 2021; Rohrmann, 2020). This rate is mirrored in the site of the current study, Australia (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021). International data, including that from Australia, shows that men are both less likely to enrol in training as an ECEC educator and to complete this training than their female colleagues (Bhana & Moosa, 2016; Kirk, 2020). Rates of withdrawal from the ECEC workforce are high regardless of gender, undoubtedly reflecting discontent with high work demand and low

recognition (Phillips et al., 2016; Thorpe, Jansen, et al., 2020; Warin, Ljunggren, et al., 2021). Yet, for men, additional factors explain low recruitment and retention (Brody, 2015; Kirk, 2020). Specific attitudinal and relational dynamics, underpinned by lack of trust of men's ability and motives (Brody et al., 2021; Moosa & Bhana, 2020), can serve to isolate and exclude men from full participation in ECEC work and inclusion in the ECEC team (Børve, 2017; Sullivan et al., 2021). We ask whether the presence of more men in the workplace might change this dynamic. We take the unusual circumstance of many men working together in ECEC services and obtain accounts of their career development and experiences to address this question.

ECEC as a gender segregated occupation

ECEC persists as the domain of women. Despite ongoing efforts to assert that ECEC work integrates 'educational and intellectual' with 'caring and emotional' work (Fairchild & Mikuska, 2021), public perceptions narrowly focus on 'emotional and caring' dimensions. ECEC work is thus socially constructed as women's work, attributed to their 'naturality' of mothering and caregiving (Van Laere et al., 2014). Doing so legitimises ECEC as a poorly paid and low social status occupation that devalues women and care, despite ongoing arguments for its professional recognition in many societies (Børve, 2017; Tennhoff et al., 2015). A substantial amount of work has also debated the extent to which men's participation disrupts stereotypes of ECEC as a 'feminine' occupation (e.g. Warin, 2019; Osgood & Mohandas, 2020; Xu, 2020). Whilst beyond this paper's scope to engage in depth with this debate, we concur with the assertion that the gendered construction of ECEC disadvantages all working in the sector and should be challenged. Although our paper focuses particularly on how men can be included, we endorse an inclusive ECEC workforce that values all workers and is valued by society as a profession that deserves higher pay and social status

(McDonald, et al., 2018; Thorpe, Jansen et al., 2020).

Against a setting that, through low valuing and poor work conditions, marginalises all working in the ECEC sector, the literature identifies additional challenges that men are presented with when entering the ECEC workplace. The challenges include many faced by minorities in gender-segregated workplaces, notably exclusion and tokenism. For women, these dynamics are well documented in examples from the transport, military, and construction industries (Bridges et al., 2021; Foley et al., 2020). Yet, men in ECEC face unique challenges. Research consistently identifies suspicion and concerns about risk directed towards male educators, together with questions regarding men's overall competency in caring for and educating young children (Andrew, 2015a; Xu & Waniganayake, 2018). The circumstance of men choosing to enter low paid 'care work' with young children raises the question, *why are you here?* (Bhana et al., 2021, p. 141).

Inter-personal relationships within the workplace are critical in attracting men into ECEC work (Brody et al., 2021; Sullivan et al., 2021) and in supporting their retention (Gallant & Riley, 2017; Kirk, 2020). The literature documents that ongoing participation of gender minorities is predicated on supportive and inclusive interactions with colleagues, while exclusionary actions, accusations or implications of incompetency, and tokenism hasten their exit (Kirk, 2020; Yang & McNair, 2019). Women in male-dominated workplaces experience exclusion, but alongside are rewarded with higher status and remuneration (Kossek et al., 2016). In comparison, men who work in roles traditionally occupied by women not only experience exclusion but must also manage the challenge of interrogated masculinity in which they subvert gender stereotypes by choosing to enter employment characterised by low status and pay (Warin, 2014). For example, men working as nurses report experiencing stigma, questioning of their sexual orientation and masculinity, and inferred incompetence (Cottingham, 2019; Cottingham et al., 2015; Shen-Miller & Smiler,

2015). They also report being excluded from full participation in their nursing duties by colleagues and patients because of concerns about the appropriateness of intimate touch in clinical duties (Clow et al., 2015; Gavine et al., 2020; Kim & Moon, 2021). However, in nursing there are signs of change towards greater professional recognition and social acceptance commensurate with increasing male participation (Chen et al., 2020; Gavine et al., 2020). Evidence from studies of men working in ECEC document similar exclusionary experiences but to date little is known about the effects of increase male presence

For decades, male participation in ECEC has been considered deviant (Bhana & Moosa, 2016; Kamberi et al., 2016). Male educators may be framed as potential sexual predators, either explicitly or implicitly (Heikkilä & Hellman, 2017; Moosa & Bhana, 2020). The consequences of this framing are exclusion from fully participating as an ECEC educator. Some men report being excluded from undertaking intimate duties such as toileting and nappy changing (Hedlin et al., 2019; Morton, 2019). Further, to mitigate suspicion, they report being cautious regarding physical touch and may avoid comforting and cuddling children (Bullough, 2015). Bhana et al., (2021) reports an Australian male educator's experience of being prevented from changing nappies. He describes the strangeness of being considered *different* and the extra steps taken to appease parent concerns that his participation was *weird*. This perceived risk is identified as a key explanation for men's low participation and high rate of exit from the ECEC workforce (Eidevald et al., 2018; Kirk, 2020).

Questioning men's competencies is an ongoing exclusionary dynamic of the ECEC workplace (Andrew, 2015b; Eidevald et al., 2021; Mallozzi & Galman, 2014). Studies document female colleagues portraying men as risk-takers, allowing, or even encouraging, risk-taking behaviour amongst children in their care (Sandseter, 2014; Storli & Sandseter, 2017). Although contemporary educational philosophies promote child agency and ability to take risk as positive learning experiences (Josephidou, 2020; Obee et al., 2020), when men

supervise children's play, risk-taking may be construed as a sign of incompetence. Questioning of men's abilities also extends to performance of administrative and professional responsibilities. For example, men are often presented by their female colleagues as 'having fun', while women assert their 'responsibility' for record-keeping and educational planning (Børve, 2017; Hedlin et al., 2019; Sullivan et al., 2021). Describing a pervading undercurrent of tension, female educators have been documented as portraying their male colleagues as lazy, irresponsible and/or lacking professionalism (Sullivan et al., 2020). Discrimination and exclusion, whether implicit or explicit, is reported as commonplace (Kamberi et al., 2016). An ongoing challenge is to increase inclusion and enable the full contribution of men in ECEC workplaces.

The inclusion and contribution of men in ECEC

Advocacy from leadership can offset perceptions of risk and suspicion and reduce feelings of exclusion (Iannucci & MacPhail, 2019). While scholarship reports that some men rationalise their exclusion from toileting duties as providing protection from accusations (Bhana et al., 2021; Eidevald et al., 2021), such actions implicitly message and reinforce a lack of trust (Kamberi et al., 2016; Sullivan et al., 2020). Leaders who assert and defend men's right to full participation, in contrast, convey trust, and message this beyond the workplace to parents and broader society (Kamberi et al., 2016; Ljunggren et al., 2021; Sullivan et al., 2020; Warin & Adriany, 2017).

Workplace relationships with colleagues and centre leadership emerge as pivotal to male educator retention (Eidevald et al., 2021; Gallant & Riley, 2017). In ECEC services where a male educator is employed, he is typically the only man (Rohrmann, 2020; Thorpe et al., 2018). Thus, he is at once an anomaly who as an outsider who experiences prejudice and a unique asset subject of pride that sets the centre apart from typical all-female centres

(Andrew, 2016; Warin, 2018). The example of nursing suggests that more men in a traditionally women-dominated occupation may improve inclusion in the workplace (Cottingham, 2019). The opportunities to know whether this dynamic also applies in ECEC are limited because male participation is extremely low, and men's presence dispersed. To understand requires finding an example where men work together in ECEC. This study presents such examples. We investigate the unique situation of clusters of male educators working together in two Australian ECEC centres. We examine men's accounts of their workplace and focus on their sense of inclusion and contribution. We ask if the clustering of men changes the experience of working in ECEC; if more men transform the work environment to become inclusive and trusting; and if in these circumstances men are afforded the opportunity to make full professional contribution.

Methods

Applying a semi-structured biographical format, ten interviews were undertaken with men working in two Australian childcare centres. The uptake of participation was 72% with two male educators declining to participate in each centre (10/14). In each the director was male, and male educators comprised 20% (5/25) and 25% (9/36) of a culturally diverse staff; ten times the average representation of men in the Australian (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021) and international workforce (Rohrmann, 2020). Characteristics of the men (using pseudonyms) and their workplaces are provided in Table 1 below.

Pseudonym	**Centre**	**Age**	**Years in Centre**	**Years in Sector**	**Highest ECE Education**
Herbert	Urban	29	7	8	Bachelor
Daniel	Urban	35	2	14	Diploma
Tommy	Urban	34	4	6	Cert III
Matt	Regional	28	5	5	Cert III

Steve	Regional	25	3	3	Cert III
Pete	Regional	35	8	8	Cert III
Rick	Regional	30	8	8	Cert III
Luke	Regional	34	1	15	Diploma
John	Regional	27	5	6	Cert III
Kyle	Regional	41	10	10	Bachelor

Table 1: Participant demographics

NB. The role of participant is excluded to protect identity- n=2 directors; n=1 early childhood teachers; n= 2 group leaders; n=5 assistants

Project ethics approval was gained through the University of Queensland Institutional Human Research Ethics Board (approval number #2020000247). Interviews were conducted from May to November 2020 with informed verbal and written formats consent from participants. During this period significant additional demands were placed on the ECEC workforce due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This circumstance necessitated data collection via Zoom rather than the originally planned face-to-face interviews. Interviews were of 45 - 90 minutes duration. These took a biographical format with questions eliciting detail of experiences across the participant's career path. As COVID-19 placed stress on the ECEC workforce the employing organisation restricted data collection to interviews with male educators rather than all staff, as planned. Despite these limitations, as the first to focus on clustering of male educators, the study remains a unique contribution to the current body of evidence.

An abductive analysis of verbatim interview transcripts was undertaken to better understand processes of inclusion men in ECEC. One key feature of our sample was the longevity of their tenure: ranging from 3-15 years. Thus, a biographical/developmental framing was adopted as the theoretical lens from which to understand career progression and experience (McDonald et al., 2018). Abductive analysis required theoretically informed reading of the transcripts to identify key narratives pertaining to the developmental course of

participants' experiences in ECEC while also allowing for emergent themes that fed back into theory development (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2017). This iterative process included ongoing reflections and discussions among the co-authors to develop and connect emergent themes. The biographical narratives provided a developmental model of career engagement while accounts of work experience provided opportunity for emergent themes within. These are summarised in Figure 1.

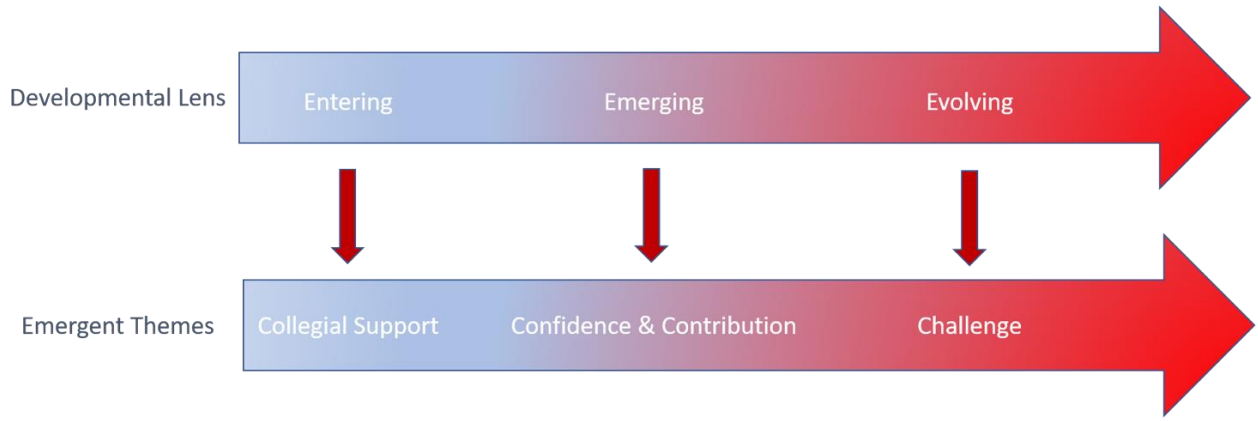

Figure 1: Analytical Framework

Findings

The men in our study represent stories of success. They have stayed. They entered the ECEC workplace as novices with limited experience in the profession and emerged and evolved as professional educators of children. Our findings are presented applying the three key stages of the developmental lens, with discussion of the emergent themes within.

The alien invader: Entering ECEC and the critical role of collegial support

> I was this alien invader in this world dominated by females and (think), what am I doing?

Daniel portrayed himself as isolated upon entering ECEC. Describing himself as an *alien* and *invader* at once captures his experience of being an outsider, and his concern that he was intruding into women's workspace. His sense of not belonging led him to question his

decision to become an early childhood educator. Notably, Daniel identifies a supportive and collegial female educator as a critical support at that time.

> ...they just ate me alive [the female educators], like I'm male, and she's like 'don't worry'. Just took me under her wing and she's like, 'oh, I'll talk to the Director, maybe you can come into my room'.

Daniel's vivid description of fear, characterising many female colleagues as having the potential to *eat him alive* is contrasted with his evocation of motherhood when describing a single female protector, who *took him under her wing*. His account reflects the long-held binary construction of women in Australia: the emotionally nurturing mother and the predatory woman (Summers, 1975). This potentially problematic construction and reinforcement of hegemonic gender stereotypes are also prevalent across many countries and societies (Brownhill et al., 2021; Rohrmann 2020; Warin, 2019; Xu, 2020). Nevertheless, Daniels's account points towards the importance of having at least one supportive colleague for counteracting a sense of 'otherness' and promoting inclusion.

Similarly, Herbert reflects on his experience as a lone male within a new group of female students undertaking a degree in early childhood education.

> …you go "oh jeepers, I don't think they want me in their group kind of thing because I'm the only dude here. What can he bring to the group, is he going to pull his weight?"

Like Daniel's first experience, Herbert perceived judgement from female students. While his account does not suggest direct accusation of laziness, his description is of being guarded and concerned that female students may perceive him as less competent and less willing to contribute. Such perceived mistrust has been previously documented in male educators' narratives (Bhana & Moosa, 2016; Moosa & Bhana, 2020; Thorpe et al., 2018; Warin, 2019), and may explain higher rates of dropout from training (Kirk, 2020; Yang & McNair, 2019).

In contrast, female support may buffer attrition. Luke, an assistant educator, and only male in his college class, describes the importance of the support of female colleagues during his training.

> Then, I made friends at (College) ...we made a little support group there. So, we - all the girls and I would study. There was 90 girls and myself, one male.

Support from *male* colleagues also emerges as a powerful factor contributing to retention. Matt provides an account of the importance of support when entering ECEC. Matt, like Daniel, describes fear and asserts that having a male colleague made his entry into ECEC less *scary*.

> When you're a male, especially in a new service, it's very daunting. It's a one hundred place centre, so it can be a bit scary, but he [male co-worker] assured it would be all right and he was really good at guiding and helping me throughout my journey.

John elaborates on the benefit of male mentorship.

> When I started, there was actually two other male educators already. I got really close with one of the male educators there, and he sort of became my mentor in a way as well as a friend... He became a really good support for me so if I ever needed any questions or anything like that, it was good to have - we had common ground both being males.

Notably, John describes the importance of male friendship as extending beyond professional support to personal friendships and the sharing of *common ground*. John develops this theme further by speaking of the importance of successful male role models.

> I could go in there and see... [male] educators on the floor and then as well a male in a leadership role. […] It kind of made it a little bit easier and took away those worries and that about being a male in that industry […] Just having other males around is just a help, I think, just for anyone that wants to get into the field being a male.

John asserts that role models and being part of a team of male educators makes entry and

ongoing participation in ECEC easier. With male colleagues he was not *an alien*. Rick explicitly identifies the presence of other males as a factor in retention.

> But having [Pete] and [Kyle] here – like if I came in and was the only male, I don't know if I would have lasted.

For Rick who has worked in ECEC for almost a decade, the counter-factual (if men had not been here), is testament to the importance of male colleagues for retention.

Entering an ECEC centre as an educator can be isolating, frightening, and challenging for men. The accounts of these men both implicitly and explicitly position collegial support as a key factor in retention at entry to their career. As they persist in this workplace, support continues to be a recurring theme. With support, the men move beyond fear to build professional confidence.

She's really helped me grow my confidence: Emerging as a professional

> [Michelle] talked to me about ways I could engage with the children and ways I can hold a group. Since then, I can run group times with 30 children. She's really helped me grow my confidence and… build relationships with the children.

Matt recounted the professional learning received from his female colleague, Michelle. The intellectual challenge and skill required to work with a large group of children are oftentimes not recognised outside the ECEC workplace where caring work is socially and culturally constructed as instinctual 'women's work' and outside men's 'natural' abilities (Børve, 2017; Emilsen et al., 2021; Kamberi et al., 2016; Osgood & Mohandas, 2020). Given this, Matt's account simultaneously speaks to the power of a female educator as a mentor and expert for developing essential skills and professional growth, yet also underscores the expectation for women to teach these essential skills to new educators, and, in particular, men.

Nevertheless, several of the male educators presented female mentorship as formative in

developing confidence and skill as an educator. Steve also attributes growth in confidence and capability to the inputs of his female colleagues.

> We had a really supportive room leader in our room who took me under her wing a bit and mentored me in a way which was really good for me with the transition to having key children to having more documentation to do and more responsibility.

Although Steve, like Daniel, evokes motherhood in describing his female colleague taking him *under her wing*, here the term describes mentorship rather than emotional protection. Collegial support, and professional mentorship by female colleagues emerges as a central theme in the men's engagement, learning, and development as confident and professional educators.

Male support, collegiality, and fellowship evolves from a mechanism of protection and support to one of identity and confidence. The men's accounts of working within a cluster of male colleagues portrays the emergence of a distinct male-educator identity. Daniel, a director, highlights the change in workplace dynamics with increasing male participation. He contrasts his early experience of isolation as an *alien invader* with the experiences of more recent entrants who he believes are not alienated.

> But I'm happy because I've seen the change over the years [with increase in male participation] for great and that makes me happy because hopefully [Herbert] and [Tommy], when you spoke to them, they didn't feel that way (fear) like I did.

Luke, the presence of male colleagues is a factor delivering a positive workplace ethos and improved productivity.

> Just getting to know the boys a bit more. I'm finding having those connections that are quite strong, you work stronger at work, and you know each other.

In one of our study centres the support and contribution of men has developed beyond the work environment. Kyle describes an emergent group identity that commenced as *the boys*

getting together outside of work and developed into a formal program of support for families, the *Big Brother program*.

> They [the children] participate in what we call the Big Brother program. It's an additional male educator that they're aligned with, and that male educator does some - depending on the child and what their learning journey is, it could be an excursion around the corner to the cafe for a milkshake and cookie.

The program was initiated by the male educators and aimed to make a unique contribution to children by improving relational and social learning. Kyle describes the male initiated program as providing a safe space for children to connect with an individual male educator to support their learning. The program and the presence of male educators are presented as a unique asset and a source of pride to the service that features the program on their website (including the (here de-identified) photo presented below).

Photo reproduced with permission from the organisation

The Big Brother program foregrounds trust in the male educators and legitimises their unique contribution, presenting the men as a team within a team. However, singling men out as a

source of pride and presenting them as assets risks undermining the work of female colleagues (Warin, 2019; Wilkinson & Warin, 2022). The program potentially reinforces claims that men have 'fun', while female colleagues must engage in everyday responsibilities (Børve, 2017; Sullivan et al., 2021). This may marginalise the essential work of women in ECEC, raising questions regarding whether equity is best served through developing this team within a team.

Nevertheless, the men's narratives of building confidence and a deeper recognition of their own contributions are intimately tied to collegial mentorship and support of *both* female and male colleagues. The emergence of distinct professional roles and a group identity separate to women are implicated in retention of men in ECEC but are also potentially disruptive. Diversity brings new perspectives yet new challenges to relationships with female educators.

We all bring a different perspective: Evolving as a team of men and women

> It's funny, because our female team members are our biggest advocates. They really are. They're really out there telling families and showing the community, particularly like, they might go to training and they're like, 'oh you're from [Centre Name], how is it to work with all those men?' They're like, 'it's fantastic. We all bring a different perspective.'

In the above quote, Kyle describes the importance of advocacy from female colleagues. He employs the qualifying phrase "it's funny" and reiterates that female educators are "*really* out there" [emphasis added] supporting male educators. His language suggests surprise at the level of advocacy and support received, given the potential disruption to the established order arising from the unusual circumstance of nine men working in a single centre.

A sense of belonging and collegiality is attributed to the presence of a team of men in the centre. Many participants describe spending time with their male colleagues outside

work, and frame this as evidence of commitment to developing and maintaining collegiality with each other. Matt shares accounts of the connection between friendships and workplace.

> …building those relationships with each other makes a difference at work. The parents notice a closer centre and closer bonded staff- really brings everyone closer.

Juxtaposed with the advantages of male friendships and identity-building are challenges to the status quo and workplace norms. Rick shares his account of these emerging tensions in the playground.

> You get a lot of the negative – if you're out in the playground, and I'm playing a game of soccer with the boys, and girls play too, I think sports really undervalued, especially to female staff because it's looked at as just – if you're having fun, you're not doing your job, or sport's just sport, it's not important. But I have that many children that socially can't interact and engage, but through sport, they'll actually come over and play. There's so many more pros to it. Yeah. I just wish they would do their research.

Rick invokes research to portray men's engagement in outdoor play as professional work, but reports that his female colleagues hold the contrasting view that play is mere fun. Without female colleagues' accounts, we cannot fully understand these relationship dynamics; a limitation of the restricted access to staff. Nevertheless, tensions that focused on the pedagogical importance of play, and the perception of 'fun versus responsibility', have been previously documented (Josephidou, 2020). We note one study reports that female educators changed their perspectives and became more actively engaged in play themselves when exposed to male educators' approach to play (Storli & Sandseter, 2017).

Despite the experience and qualifications of the men in our study, tensions regarding competence are reported to persist. Even those who are degree qualified relate feeling judged and needing to prove their worth. Herbert, a degree qualified teacher, suggests his professional work is subject to female colleagues' scrutiny.

> Yeah, and you're almost put in positions where you have to prove yourself, but I guess it's how internally you think about it… it can get tiring just proving yourself to other people.

Steve identified a double standard in which men's social interactions are scrutinised.

> Sometimes it feels like if two male educators are doing something – having a chat or anything really, it gets blown more out of proportion than if it does if it's two female educators.

Rick in contrast scrutinises female educators, suggesting male educators do more work and make more effort.

> We even have a father's group. There was no mothers group where the female educators would give up their weekends and go to the park with a group of mums. But there were a group of guy educators here, we gave up our Saturday morning, and we'd go set up a barbeque and have a barbeque with parents and stuff, the dads. They'd bring their kids, and we'd just kick a ball around, and the dads would hang out.

Connecting with fathers is clearly a positive contribution. However, Rick positions male educators as more committed to the work, centre, and children than female educators, thereby marginalising women's contribution and reinforcing gender stereotypes. Missing in his account is any mention of the ECEC centre affording positive social opportunities for women (Fairchild & Mikuska, 2021). Also missing is recognition that many women have large constraints on their time with greater care and domestic responsibilities (Yerkes et al., 2020) that make it difficult to commit to additional unpaid labour outside work hours.

Despite evident tensions, Herbert suggests that men add fun to the ECEC environment. Herbert positions male educators as 'emotional balancers' (Sullivan et al., 2020), aligning with prior studies in which both female and male educators attribute a calmer and less 'catty' workplace environment to the presence of male educators (Andrew, 2016;

Thorpe et al., 2018). These gendered narratives point to unspoken gender comparisons that pervade.

> I think I've noticed since more guys have come on, the laughing and the joking has increased. A lot of the other females love a good laugh as well, they jump in a lot more which is nice. Less bickering more laughing, I like that.

With growing confidence and claiming of the unique contributions of male educators we see both continuation of old gender conflicts and emergence of new challenges. Old conflicts are present in gender divisions of 'fun and responsibility' and 'laughter and bickering', while new challenges are present in men claiming a distinct role that undermines and undervalues the long and deep taken-for-granted contribution women make in ECEC. Thus, we witness the reproduction of gendered structures (Warin, 2019; Xu, 2020; Yang & McNair, 2020).

Discussion

An international labour supply crisis has been the catalyst for renewed attention to increasing the participation of men in the ECEC workforce (OECD, 2019). Yet long-term attempts to attract and retain men in this female-dominated sector have largely been unsuccessful (Brody et al., 2021; Rohrmann, 2020). While low pay and high work demands undoubtedly explain ongoing problems of recruitment and generalised high turnover rates in the sector (Thorpe, Jansen, et al., 2020; Yang & McNair, 2020), for men these conditions present some unique challenges related to questioning their motives (Eidevald et al., 2018, 2021; Emilsen et al., 2021). Tackling structural issues of pay and conditions is likely to be a long-term task, and one that female educators have been advocating for years (McDonald et al., 2018; Yang & McNair, 2019). In the short-term the key factor supporting recruitment and retention in ECEC is the immediate workplace environment, including both collegial relationships between co-workers and the quality of leadership within a centre (Heikkilä & Hellman, 2017;

Ljunggren et al., 2021; Thorpe, Jansen et al., 2020; Warin, Ljunggren, et al., 2021).

In this study workplace relationships were the focus. We sought the perspectives of men who stayed in the sector and who were currently working in the unusual context of centres led by male directors with male staff representation; ten times that of national and international averages. In distilling key messages and implications of this work we identify three key emotions that underpin men's entry into the ECEC workplace. We discuss implications for workplace practice and human resource management, strength, and limitations of this study, and directions for further scholarly investigation.

It's emotional - men's accounts of work in ECEC

The accounts provided by the ten men interviewed in this study evoke high levels of emotion. First, they speak of fear, threat, judgment, and alienation at their entry to the ECEC workplace. Those entering as a lone male educator identify the protection and guidance of an individual female colleague as critical in the early phase of their career. Those entering centres in which there are other male educators identify the importance of both men and women in providing the support that allowed them to stay, learn, and flourish. Second, they speak of reward, contribution, fun, enjoyment, and professionalism. In describing their work and extra-curricular contributions, the men position their work as both joyful and intellectual. They talk of the research base on which they draw and their motivation to make a difference to children and families. Important in these accounts is contesting the work as 'instinctual mothering' (Warin, Ljunggren, et al., 2021). They assert the work is fun but also deeply important, carrying with it responsibility for children's learning and development. In so doing these men provide a voice for the value of work in ECEC, one often overlooked and taken for granted when spoken by women (Andrew, 2016; Thorpe, Staton, et al., 2020). Valuing men's voice and engagement in ECEC, however, can elicit new tensions. Thus, the third emergent

emotion is challenge and overt conflict in which the inevitable role of gender dynamics come into play (Andrew, 2016; Eidevald et al., 2018; Yang & McNair, 2020). While men claim new ground and new contributions, male colleagues presented women as gatekeepers and surveillors of their activity. In the absence of women's voice in this study we are unable to know or understand women's responses. However, one might anticipate that valorising men, as seen in the photograph presenting men as the face of one of our study centres, could be construed as undervaluing the long history and ongoing inputs of their female colleagues to the care and education of young children (Warin, Wilkinson, et al., 2021). As the providers of ECEC services and individual centres move to increase participation of men, understanding the perspective of men *and* women, and of harnessing and recognising the talents of *all* staff, is clearly critical.

Strengths, limitations, and directions for research

The strength of this study is in taking rare examples of men clustering together in the female-dominated workplace of ECEC. While there are many important networks that are growing to support men to connect, this study is unique in its focus on men working as a cluster together in a centre. To our knowledge this is the first such study. Nevertheless, the study must be viewed in light of methodological limitations. Most evident is the absence of women's voice. Accounts of gender conflicts are thus only related through male educators' perspectives. We also acknowledge that our study was solely dependent on interview data. A range of other methodologies, including observational work or group-based data collections, might provide alternative perspectives and insights.

The purpose of this study was to understand the role of collegial relationships in the retention of men in ECEC. However, we note that a key argument for inclusion of men is not addressed here. Diversity in the workforce may increase productivity (Vohra et al., 2015). In

the case of ECEC, productivity is seen in children's learning experiences. Diversity of child composition within a class group has been found to improve quality of experience (Thorpe et al, 2012). Similarly, diversity in the workforce has been argued to expand children's experiences with benefit for learning and developmental outcomes (Kamberi et al., 2016; McGrath & Sinclair, 2013; Rohrmann, 2020). Studies are emerging that examine the impact of gender diversity on ECEC (Brandes et al., 2015), but we identify the ongoing need to expand research methods to include observational methods and test theorised benefits for children. We also acknowledge the need to move beyond binary constructions of men and women when researching gender diversity in ECEC, and to incorporate research methods that also focus on intersections of culture, race, class, and gender.

Implications for practice

This paper has direct implications for gender diversity in ECEC and signposts to the role of diverse gender composition for workforce inclusion and productivity. Our data suggests that simply recruiting more men is insufficient to ensure a positive and harmonious workplace where men and women working as educators stay and thrive. Rather, tensions emerge. Diversity sensitive policy frameworks, including those relating to gender, might be required. These might specify a code of conduct that makes explicit the right of educators to fully participate in all aspects of ECEC work. Such a policy provides a foundational principle for centre leaders if a male educator's full participation is challenged. Further, such actions showcase organisations' recognition and support of workforce diversity and foster a level of security and inclusion within the organisational culture. We note however, that Australia's workforce strategy for the next decade presented in the *Shaping our Futures* report (Education Services Australia, 2021) while acknowledging the importance of diversity, does not consider specific supports. The OECD report (2019), similarly explicitly names men as a

source of labour supply but does not identify need for specific supports for inclusion.

Policy assertions do not incur cost. However, to be effective investment, inclusion in training, and attendant inclusive work environments may be necessary to avert loss of trained educators. Evidence in our data, and elsewhere, suggest language within ECEC centres is often gendered (Andrew, 2016). Identifying language use as a means of messaging gender attitudes should be made explicit. Inductions of new staff (regardless of their gender) undertaken by centre leadership might also include some of this information about diversity, gender, and sensitivity.

Mentorship of new male entrants emerged as critical. This finding suggests purposeful allocation of class teams within a centre as a means by which minorities can receive emotional support and intellectual mentorship. The advocacy of leadership and the foregrounding of diverse teams rather than the 'big brothers' might be a more appropriate way to celebrate successful inclusion practices, for true inclusion requires respectful relationships as majority and minority groups work together.

Data availability statement

Due to the nature of this research, participants of this study did not agree for their data to be shared publicly.

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