

Critically Discuss the Policy and Research Evidence Which Examines the Role of Men in Early Childhood Education and Care

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Abstract

Attracting more men to balance the predominantly female workforce is one of the key issues facing the early childhood education and care (ECEC) sector. This research critically discusses the main debates regarding the issue of gendered ECEC sector, including the core concepts of childhood, masculinity and ECEC, followed by the debates about the influences of more male practitioners on both children and ECEC workforce. Although there exist some arguments against the hypothesis about men's benefits on children and ECEC workforce, the need to get men involved in the lives of young children is reflected by government policies across different countries, such as recruitment and retention initiatives for male preschool teachers. However, most of these strategies to remove the barriers male teachers encountered, and to incorporate men and fathers, received negative results. Therefore, by building upon the need to enhance the holistic quality of ECEC workforce, new perspectives, especially from children's perceptions, on how to change the gender imbalance in ECEC are recommended, including both the top-down policy and bottom-up strategy.

Keywords: role of men, ECEC workforce, benefits and barriers, children's perspectives

1. Introduction

On average, two-thirds of the educational workforce in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries, including pre-primary, primary, and secondary, for example, are females (OECD, 2015; OECD, 2016). More significantly, according to the OECD statistics, the pre-primary education sector is the most typical female-dominated workforce across the world, with at least 90% of female practitioners (OECD, 2017). Thus, involving more men to counterbalance this mostly feminised workforce is one of the critical discourses facing the field of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) (Mistry & Sood, 2015), despite the heated debate around the argument that ECEC is 'women's work' (Cameron, Moss & Owen, 1999, p. 145), which still continues today.

Comparison between OECD 2012 and 2017 data shows an increase in male participation from 3% in 2010 to 10% in 2015 in the earlier years of schooling (OECD 2012; OECD, 2017). This change of the male involvement indicates that men are gradually crossing gendered work boundaries in ECEC, yet it is still insignificant (Bagilhole & Cross, 2006). It seems that some countries have taken actions on attracting more men in this field, but most of the results were below the expectation. In 1996, for instance, the ECEC workforce was given an ambition by the European Commission Network on Childcare to aim for achieving 20% male workers in ECEC in a decade (Vandenbroeck & Peeters, 2008). Accordingly, several government projects and actions were launched, but none of the European countries fulfilled this aim in 2006 (Peeters, 2007). Still, the vast majority of practitioners in the Early Years (EY) sector is female. In contrast, male workers are usually regarded as 'others' — 'sometimes welcomed and idealised, sometimes looked at with scepticism and distrust', which reflects paradoxes and contradictions existing in the issue about the role of men in ECEC (Brody, 2014, p. ix).

This paper critically discusses the central debates regarding the issue of gendered ECEC sector. It will be argued that the traditional views of the role of men still prevail and there are doubts about the contemporary interpretations, leading to the female-dominated ECEC workforce. This paper commences with debates about the core concepts, including childhood, masculinity and ECEC, followed by the debates about the potential benefits of more male practitioners to both children and ECEC workforce. Subsequently, it will demonstrate the barriers against men's entry into ECEC and individual responses. Finally, previous government initiatives to remove the barriers from the international perspective will be discussed. More effective ways to recruit and retain more men to work in ECEC will be presented. This paper suggests taking children's opinions into account as recommended by Sumsion (2005), and initiatives should target for the professionalism of the sector instead of overemphasising on the alternation of the female-male workforce ratio.

2. Debates Surrounding the Related Concepts

On the issue of the role of men in ECEC, throughout this paper, there are three central terms constructed historically and socially: child image, masculinity and ECEC. Underpinning all the three concepts are the paradoxical understandings between the traditional beliefs and the new beliefs, which are coexisting since there is no agreement on a particular interpretation. According to Moss (2014), there is no absolute understanding of any construct since different beliefs may coexist. That is to say, the constructs above are likely to be affected by the historical arguments. Thus, they are difficult to be entirely replaced by the current understanding. Moreover, the tensions between the coexisting discussions of the constructs lead to the issue concerning the role of men in ECEC (Osgood, 2006).

2.1 Debates About How to Conceptualise Children

Adults' opinions about how to view children, competent or not, are likely to affect the public's opinions of teachers, thus deciding the social status of teachers, respectful or not (Zembylas & Papanastasiou, 2006).

Child image describes the way of adults' viewing children which is determined by historical, social and cultural backgrounds (Jans, 2004). For instance, the notion of 'developmental child' regards children as underdeveloped and vulnerable (Piaget, 1974). Although the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child was enacted in 1989, the consideration of children as incompetent is still widespread in the rearing and education of children (Vandenhoe et al., 2015). Nevertheless, Brannen and Moss (2003) advocate another image of children, considering children as active rather than passive in both parent-child interactions in the families and teacher-child interactions at schools. At home, children co-construct with their parents to negotiate and change the family life (Brannen & Heptinstall, 2003). At school, children can develop themselves autonomously and independently (Edwards, Gandini & Forman, 1998).

However, this new understanding of children cannot entirely replace the old image of the child as incompetent. The way we look at a child is rooted in the past and is building up in the present (James & Prout, 2015). The different images of child coexist and create confusions and ambiguities (Vandenhoe et al., 2015).

2.2 Debates About How to Conceptualise Masculinity

According to Bem and colleagues (1976), individuals of both biological sexes (male and female) are likely to present femininity (the characteristics typical of women), masculinity (the characteristics typical of men) or androgyny (having both male and female characteristics). Different from the definition of biological sex, masculinity is identified as a social construct and can vary according to different times in the history and diverse cultural contexts (Butler, 2011). There remain two major discourses on the construct of masculinity that relate to the issue of the role of men in ECEC. The traditional one is the hegemonic masculinity which regards men in dominant positions and women as subordinate (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Whereas, Connell states the idea of multiple masculinities, a new way of understanding masculinity by accepting various features of men, which is suitable for the postmodern man (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005).

Hegemonic masculinity is a type of social standard against the existence of other masculinities, indicating that there are subordinate masculinities, for example, the characteristics which are presented by male EY practitioners (Skelton, 2003; Doucet, 2004). Male teachers in ECEC are still negatively affected by the notion that they are not real men as defined by hegemonic standards (Lupton, 2006). However, Brody's (2015) observation and narratives of male EY teachers in six countries across the world find that they express their masculinities in various ways, which impact on their attitudes towards children and contributions to their work (Kimmel, Hearn & Connell, 2005).

The contradiction between the stereotyped hegemonic masculinity and the diverse masculinities argued by empirical research can be a source of tension and debate in both practices in ECEC and how it is conceptualised in policy (Heikkilä & Hellman, 2017). Therefore, men in ECEC 'must remain conscious of their gender and monitor their presentation at all times to present correct masculinity' (Sargent, 2000, p. 186).

2.3 Debates About How to Conceptualise ECEC

Based on the 19th-century patriarchal idea that within families, women are caretakers and men are breadwinners, ECEC as a substitute and extension of the home has been long dominated by the female who can nurture young children (Owen, Cameron & Moss, 1998). Also, the notion of ECEC as the substitute of home echoes with the original attachment theory developed by Bowlby, who highlights the importance of young children's connection with their mothers (Bowlby, May & Solomon, 1989). However, the attachment theory has been extended: infants can form multiple attachments with their caregivers, including mothers and fathers (Nutbrown, 2011). Taking the UK as an example, there are more and more fathers carrying out the domestic duties and assuming the caring roles (Doucet & Merla, 2007). 'There is also evidence suggests the incidence of fathers who are the 'primary caregiver' is increasing in the UK, and an increasing body of research indicates positive benefits for children of paternal involvement' (Norman, Elliot & Fagan, 2014, p. 164).

Although fathers are encouraged to take their responsibilities for their children, 'men being employed to care for other people's children is much more controversial' (Family and Childcare Trust, 2018). Thus, it is suggested that early years providers should cooperate and work with fathers when they educate and care young children (Miller & Hevey, 2012). Therefore, ECEC is not constrained to the extension of the home; instead, it is a necessary supplement to children's families (Haddad, 2002). Government Policies also support the cooperation between EY settings and father. The 'Daddy Month' reform launched by Sweden, for instance, provides fathers with a month of paternal leave (Ekberg, Eriksson & Friebe, 2013).

3. Debates About the Benefits of the Male Presence in the ECEC Workforce

Among different opinions on the construct of children, masculinity and ECEC, the advantages of male participation in ECEC remain uncertain (Quinn, Lyons & Sumsion, 2003; Rentzou, 2011; Sak et al., 2012). The most significant reasons for involving more men into ECEC are twofold: it is beneficial for children's development as well as the professionalisation of the ECEC workforce (Ho & Lam, 2014). However, when focusing individually on each of them, recurring arguments are challenging these two reasons for advocating male teachers' participation: the issue of male role model and the issue of gender equality in the workforce (Miller & Cable, 2010). The ambiguity of the advantages further illustrates the dilemma of involving more men to ECEC.

3.1 Men as Male Role Models

With concerns for boys who are lack of father figures in their daily life, men's function as role models is emphasised. (Martino, 2008; Brownhill, 2014). 'Role model' or 'modelling', is a part of the social learning theory to explain people's attitudes and behaviours learned from similar others in the process of observation (Merton, 1976; Bandura & Walters, 1977). An empirical study observed the interactions between teachers and children in the daily basis, finding that 'male teachers can produce more positive attitudes amongst boys and female teachers amongst girls, whereas there are few male teachers acting as role models for boys' (Carrington, Tymms & Merrell, 2008, p. 316). A lack of male teachers means a lack of male role models for boys' academic competency and socio-emotional development, which is the major concern for involving more male teachers in ECEC.

There were many concerns about the gender gaps in the attainment and academic outcomes in children's primary and secondary schools (Dee, 2006; McCormick & O'Connor, 2015). However, a statistics report concluded by the UK government shows that boys' disaffection with schooling starts in the early stages, with more than 30% failing to reach the expected level in literacy and 25% struggling with mathematics (Buchmann, DiPrete & McDaniel, 2008). Moreover, according to a report in the Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) Project, even at the entry to pre-school, girls generally show better cognitive outcomes than boys (Sylva et al., 2004). These pieces of data evidence echo with Dee's research, which finds that the reason for 8th-grade boys being outperformed by their female classmates is multiple years of schooling from a teacher of the same gender (Dee, 2006). Highlighted by Martino (2008), EY male teachers' teaching styles serve as the complement to the relatively static teaching practices of women by incorporating energetic movement and vigorous activities, thus enticing boys' motivation to study. The role of male teachers to engage boys into learning also echoes with the motivational theory of role modelling: role models are often as a way of motivating individuals to set ambitious goals and achieve success with inspiration (Morgenroth, Ryan & Peters, 2015). Accordingly, boys are inspired by their male teachers to reach their learning goals in the learning journey (Parker-Jenkins et al., 2007).

Apart from the concern for the feminised teachers disadvantaging boys in academic performance (Drudy, 2008), the EPPE project also indicates that pre-school girls usually present better social-emotional development than boys, especially the socially disadvantaged boys (Tinklin, 2003; Sylva et al., 2004). Boys can develop their social-emotional skills such as building a friendly relationship with others if they recognise their male teachers are acting like the caring role (Rolfe, 2006). Male teachers are essential to offer children stable male role models,

which can help boys to envision masculinity differently as they can see men engage in the supportive, caring and nurturing role (Skelton, 1994; Skelton, 2003). Additionally, the presence of male EY workers can compensate for what is lacking at home, especially for the children who come from single-parent families who require father figures to imitate (Piburn, Nelson & Carlson, 2011).

By contrast, there is reservation about the role model hypothesis. Firstly, the opinion that male teachers can add another kind of teaching style into the classroom is originated from the assumption that male practitioners act differently from their female counterparts in ECEC (Dickey, 2017). However, Vandenbroeck and Peeters (2008) conduct a study in Belgium to interview students' opinions upon the gender differences of their teachers. They found that both male and female teachers are similar in some basic qualities significant of being a teacher, although the male teachers may report themselves as being different and valuing this diversity (Vandenbroeck & Peeters, 2008). Some researchers also questioned the ethnographical research design and data collection instruments, since the majority of which concentrated on male teachers' self-reports with subjectivity, rather than accurate evidence (Carrington, Tymms & Merrell, 2008). Contrastingly, a study in Australia asked preschool children to draw a profile of their male teachers, analysing children's opinions hidden behind the pictures, Sumsion (2005) concludes that men appear to offer similar features with female teachers in their work with young children (p. 120). Secondly, although there are some differences between the male and female in ECEC, according to Bullough Jr's case study (2015), by comparing a female teacher and a male teacher in a Head Start team, the similar qualities shared by the two genders are more important for children's development. It questions the common view that male teachers are important for boys' development of appropriate social behaviours by merely being men (Martino, Lingard & Mills, 2004, p. 361). Furthermore, research that includes the voices of men in childcare often involves a small sample of the participant (Vandenbroeck & Peeters, 2008). When a British study incorporates a large sample of 413 primary school classes across the UK, it finds 'no empirical evidence to support the claim that there is a tendency for male teachers to enhance the educational performance of boys' (Carrington, Tymms & Merrell, 2008, p. 321).

Besides, no one can give the exact meaning of the male role model; diverse views are expressed by different researchers (Brownhill, 2010). More interestingly, children do not necessarily perceive teachers as role models (Sumsion, 2005). Brownhill (2015) investigated the feelings of several men who were teaching the children aged from 0 to 8 years old. He found that the definition of 'role model' is not identified because of different contexts and situations. For example, role models in the settings for age 0 to 5 are likely to be defined as nurturers. Whereas in the age 5 to 8 sector, the role model is more likely to be defined by their 'good behaviour' (Ahmad et al., 2017). Moreover, if taking into consideration children's perspectives, such as the children in Sumsion's (2005) study, 'neither boys nor girls in these studies saw their teachers as role models' (p. 75). Instead, most children choose close caregivers as role models, which is parallel with the attachment theory — children make connections with carers who are more reliable (Thornton & Bricheno, 2008, p. 9). Accordingly, Brownhill (2014) further suggests that the individual characteristics and qualities of the role model are more crucial than their original genders.

3.2 Promoting Gender Equality in ECEC

A more gender-balanced workforce is needed to challenge the overall gender stereotype (Cameron et al., 2002). Male workers' participation in ECEC is a demonstration of the equal amount of male and female in the ECEC workforce (Cameron, 2006). By conducting semi-structured interviews with employees in kindergartens in Hong Kong, Ho and Lam (2014) argue that EY Chinese teachers, influenced by the foreign teachers' attitudes towards gender equality, support the argument that men can improve the gender balance in ECEC (Quinn et al., 2003; Rentzou, 2011). Moreover, most of the EY employers in England, including male and female, hold the view that more male teachers can counterbalance the feminised and monotonous ECEC workforce by adding varied skills and knowledge, for example, the humorous teachings approach (Fuller et al., 2005).

Even though the number of men increases in ECEC, they tend to take up the managerial roles, which compounds the hierarchical differences between male and female (Budig, 2002). Male workers in the female-dominated workforce can be promoted faster than women, also earning more than female counterparts (Budig, 2002). Since they can take advantage of the effect of 'glass escalator', the male practitioners in ECEC may have more chances to get promoted to better-paid positions such as the school manager (Hultin, 2003). In the UK, the statistics indicate that female head teachers only account for 62% in the primary education sector (Jones, 2009). Similarly, although the number of male practitioners in Scandinavian early childhood programs is relatively high, most of these men are managers and preschool owners, further confirming the gender stereotype (Moss, 2007). Thus, it demonstrates that despite early years education workforce is female dominated; executive positions continue to be male-dominated (Peeters, Rohrmann & Emilsen, 2015).

4. The Barriers to Male Entry into ECEC and Individual Responses

The positive trend in public opinion and government initiatives towards encouraging male into ECEC has not

only questioned by the conflicting views on the positive impacts of male practitioners on ECEC but also it must be viewed realistically against the barriers hindering their entry into ECEC (Sexton, 2017). 'A person's prior experiences with 'significant others' he/she has can affect his/her choice' (Andersen & Chen, 2002, p. 620). Take Owen's (2003) study as an example, most of the women in his study chose the EY profession with the strong support from their parents, friends and teachers. In contrast, male practitioners said that they entered into ECEC lack of support from people around them (Owen, 2003). Therefore, men are reluctant to choose the EY practitioners as their career path since they worry about others' doubtful and suspicious words. In Brody's (2014) multiple cases study, all the six male early years teachers 'operate under a cloud of suspicion' (p. 139). The suspicion refers to the debates about ECEC as women's work, the fear of potential risks for children and the low status of the ECEC profession (Nelson, 2002). However, these barriers are reducing and sometimes exist mostly at the beginning of male teachers' career path, with the time going on and their professionalism develops, the negative feelings might diminish (Johnston-Anderson, 2016). Besides, male teachers may have their way to respond to these obstacles according to their personalities. (Brody, 2014)

4.1 The Issue of Caring

Young children's care and education have always been considered as 'women's work', originated from the primary function for early childhood programmes: the caring (Cameron, Moss & Owen 1999; Cameron, Mooney & Moss, 2002). Thus, the responsibility of caring for children has been required as an essential ability for EY teachers (Cameron, 2006). Accordingly, male EY practitioners must 'resolve the dilemma of being caring enough for children while self-monitoring their gender identity to protect themselves from being suspected by their wrong presentation of masculinity' (Sargent, 2000, p. 186). This dilemma, according to the accounts by many early childhood students and practitioners, occupies the thoughts of many men in ECEC (Gosse, Parr & Allison, 2008). Roberts-Holmes (2009) conducted a study examining the feelings of male workers in ECEC and found that men felt frustrated and struggled to be accepted in a caring role, as they are afraid to be suspicious as gay.

Nevertheless, research found that male teachers have their own understandings and solutions to accomplish the caring task in the way different from female teachers (Brody, 2014). The Australian male EY teachers, for example, are taking care of children's physical well-being by acting as the disciplinary role and developing the relationship and building a community with equal teacher-child relationship, instead of caring them like a mom is caring a baby (Hansen & Mulholland, 2005). In addition, some policymakers and government set the standards to solve the dilemma between caring and professionalism in teaching especially in primary schools (Pollitt & Oldfield, 2017). The England government, for example, launched the Higher Level Teaching Assistant training and assessment programme in 2004, to expand the role of teaching assistants from caring and housekeeping towards the Higher Level Teaching Assistant status (Whitty, 2006, p. 9). However, the pre-primary sector is far beyond professionalism, leading to the dilemma of caring male practitioners faced (Hansen & Mulholland, 2005).

4.2 The Issue of Touching

Intertwined with the issue of caring is another primary issue confronted by male EY teachers: 'the issue of being easily under suspicion of paedophilia, which leads them to severe vigilance regarding physical contact with children' (Sargent, 2000, p. 7). As evident in one of Bullough Jr's (2015) participants, a male teacher was always worried about the touch issue, such as lap sitting and hugs, especially with girls. Bullough Jr (2015) described according to his observation, 'Alphonso acted cautiously, carefully, when touching a child in any way, not only to protect the child's sense of safety but also to protect himself' (p. 330). Therefore, male practitioners in the early years setting may be subjected to considerable suspicions and accusations, such as carrying out sexual abuse to children (Rolfe, 2006). 'Male teachers are thus often insecure and afraid to initiate conversations concerning themselves, sexuality and schooling for fear of being constructed as latent perverts, as men who think about sex and children' (Jones, 2007, p. 252). Male student teachers studying ECEC are hesitated to enter into this field, especially when they experience the fear and uncertainty while having physical contact with children (Cruickshank, 2018).

Nevertheless, similar to dealing with the caring issue, male teachers' diaries and journals show that they have their ways to avoid being suspicious of the risks for children, instead of touching, they make effective use of listening to give support for children (King, 1998). For example, a group of American male pre-service teachers put forward that it is useful and effective to build trust with children's parents to reduce the uncertainty and intrust from children's parents (Jong et al., 2014).

4.3 The Issue of the Low Status

Childcare is widely recognised as a profession of low pay and long hours, leading to the low status of early years practitioners in the society (Chalke, 2013). In Denmark, compared with primary teachers' 3900 Euros monthly

salary, ECEC practitioners get paid 3,350 Euros monthly on average (Zhang, 2017). The situation is worse in developing countries, such as Mexico, where salary for ECEC teachers are relatively low, in the meantime, they have to work double shifts and extra jobs' (Zhang, 2017, p. 14). Chalke (2013) further explains that the public opinion that EY workers have a low status and are mainly because of the low pay caused the limitation of practitioners' self-confidence and self-esteem. Although female teachers are severely hampered by the low wages and long-time work when choosing the ECEC profession, men can be suffered more because they may be under pressure to be a 'breadwinner' of a family (Gambaro, 2012). Thornton and Bricheno (2008) highlight in their report that men are more likely to choose the type of job with a higher wage and are easier to leave one job because of the low pay.

However, on the other hand, men can take advantage of the 'glass escalator', a well-known phenomenon of men rising to a better-paid position such as the head teacher, if they choose to leave the classroom (Owen, 2003). According to Ragins, Townsend and Mattis (1998), usually, men have more opportunities to reach the leading positions, such as executives, than their female colleagues. Besides, according to the accounts of male student teachers in EY sectors across the world, they think that their work can make them feel satisfied and happy regardless of the low wage (Brody, 2014). Most of the male teachers choose teachers as the career for positive motivations, for example, 'they enjoyed working with children, believed it would bring high job satisfaction and would be a challenging but rewarding career' (Thornton & Bricheno, 2008, p. 718).

5. The Effectiveness of the Initiatives to Involve More Men into ECEC

Internationally, considering both the potential benefits and barriers male practitioners in ECEC have, policymakers across the world have launched various initiatives including long-term projects and supporting organisations to encourage more men to work in early years sector as well as to retain them in this field (Miller et al., 2017). However, most results of these initiatives with huge aims are somewhat disappointing and frustrating (Waters & Payler, 2015). There may be many reasons, while the similarities of the reason for this failure among the countries is concluded by Sumsion (2005) as the general neglect in favour of children's voices. The primary aim for ECEC is to meet the demand of children (Brannen & Moss, 2003), so this section critically reflects on these strategies and argue for more innovative and effective approaches which can be undertaken by stakeholders upon the issue of the scarcity of men in ECEC.

5.1 The Ideal Initiatives and the Results

Both the government initiatives to attract more men into ECEC contexts and the strategies of developing fathers' interest and engagement in children's lives are on the agenda (Warin, 2017). However, 'difficulties have arisen with regard to the father's programmes, more significantly, the recruitment and retention of males in ECEC' (Hurst, 2014, p. 1). Most of the father's programmes focus on increasing the time and opportunities father can spend with their children, such as two-week paternity leave policy in the UK and the UK government document 'Supporting Families in the Foundation Years' to acknowledge fathers' responsibilities (Teather & Milton, 2011). Head Start is one of the most classic federal family programmes, which promoted parental involvement in the low socioeconomic status families in the US. Nevertheless, there were still more than half of the children in this programme living without fathers (Han, Schlieber & Gregory, 2017).

As for the recruitment and retention initiatives, during the past few decades, several European countries have announced pioneering policy and government initiatives to remove the barriers and encourage more men in ECEC (Peeters, Sharmahd & Budginaité, 2018). However, the results are not as expected. In 1988, the European ECE Children's Network on Childcare opened up a childcare centre in Sweden to recruit the same number of male teachers and female teachers (Persson & Broman, 2015). However, after one year, men chose not to stay because of the low wages and the subordinate status of this caring job (Persson & Broman, 2015). Later in 1995, the Network also set up a goal to achieve 20% male early childhood teachers in ECEC workforce by investing in extensive projects and programs, however, received no significant increase of the number of male teachers (Peeters et al., 2015). In Germany, for example, a vast campaign was launched in 2012, beginning with conducting national research and installing a national coordination office (Koch & Farquhar, 2015). In 2013, the campaign initiated another program called 'More Men in KITAS', receiving a considerable amount of funding (€13.5 million) (Peeters et al., 2015). However, the proportion of male workers in urban areas has grown, in the suburb areas, men are still rare in ECEC programmes (Cremers et al., 2010). Moreover, since the providers suspended the funding in 2013, this German initiative failed to achieve the 20% goal (Sak et al., 2012).

Besides, some local government and settings also undertake initiatives to attract more males into the ECEC, while with little positive effect (Miller & Cable, 2008). For example, 'the Sheffield Children's Centre in England has had a policy of recruiting male workers since 1985 through the strategies including public meetings and discussion, direct targeting of men's groups, radio discussions and training events' (Honig, 2008, p. 23). Despite some early success in recruitment, it faced difficulties when hiring male teachers from particular cultures, such as Somali, Arabic and Pakistani (Honig, 2008). Honig (2008) emphasises that the approaches regarding

recruiting and retention require creativity originality, and being suitable for the specific people and communities. 'Despite popular discourses calling for more men in the EY sector, the gender of the practitioner is largely immaterial' (Roberts-Holmes & Brownhill, 2011, p. 2). Thus, the more effective way should be enhancing the holistic quality of ECEC workforce, considering voices of children, instead of paying too much attention to the gender balance.

5.2 More Effective Initiatives Considering Children's Perceptions

The research investigated into children's perspectives and found that children care more about the quality of their teachers in the holistic picture, rather than the simple division between male and female (Sumsion, 2005). Therefore, the initiatives which can effectively enhance the quality of ECEC, in particular, the high-quality of the holistic workforce are needed. It is argued that 'changing the gender mix of childcare staff is more than a question of setting targets' (Brannen & Moss, 2003, p. 100). The public perceives ECEC as a field with little recognition of the professional skills that are required (Cameron, 2003). Also, as argued by Chalke (2013), the reluctance of male entry into ECEC is originated from the professional, social and emotional undervaluation of the ECEC workforce.

To efficiently enhance the profession and quality of ECEC workforce, it is essential to combine the role of top-down government-led policy and the role of bottom-up institution-led strategies in stimulating visionary policy and responding to policy measure over the long term (Field, 2010). At the government level, the current statutory framework in England, revised in 2014, has gradually increased the qualification levels required by EY practitioners, almost half of EY settings are now recruiting at least one graduate educator, compared with only a third of the settings in 2009 (Cameron & Miller, 2016). The increasing opportunities for achieving public recognition through attaining qualifications also exert positive impacts upon the practitioners' views of themselves (Waters & Payler, 2015). Cohen and Korintus (2017) advocate for incorporating the gender-neutral curricula in EY settings, also the training programmes suitable for male teachers, such as the outdoor sports. In Norway, for example, 'by increasing the number of outdoor course experiences, the number of male teachers increased, and pre-service male dropout rates decreased' (Zhang, 2017, p. 11). While at the institutional level, it will be useful if the settings can cooperate and unite together to form professional networks which serve as a support for men who are 'under-represented in the profession' (Pirard, Schoenmaeckers & Camus, 2015, p. 363). Norway set up an organisation called Networks for Men in Kindergartens (MIB) in many regions to unite teachers and to encourage sharing and communication among male teachers (Emilsen, 2011). In this organisation, the male teachers can share their opinions and feelings to enhance their job satisfaction (Moss & Cameron, 2007). Moreover, both the government and the settings can arrange seminars or workshops held by some professional colleagues and to show the professionalism of this occupation (Pirard, Schoenmaeckers & Camus, 2015).

6. Conclusion

Above all, the inclusion of more men in ECEC programs has garnered considerable attention over the years (Roberts-Holmes & Brownhill, 2011). This interest is due to the heated debates about the traditional understandings and current understandings of the associated terms, including children, masculinity and ECEC as well as the constructs leading to the debates about the benefits of the role of men in ECEC. Although there exist some arguments against the hypothesis about men's benefits on children and ECEC workforce, most people agree with the need to get men involved in the lives of young children reflected by government policies of different countries, such as acting as role models and counterbalancing the gender inequality. The scepticism and negative assumptions which are against men working with children cannot be neglected (Peeters, Rohrmann & Emilsen, 2015). Despite there being some initiatives launched by the government to remove the barriers male teachers encountered, and to incorporate men and fathers, most of them received negative results. Therefore, by building upon the need to enhance the holistic quality of ECEC workforce, new perspectives, especially from children's perceptions, on how to change the gender imbalance in ECEC are recommended, including both the top-down policy and bottom-up strategies.

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