

# Men in Childcare: Does it matter to children, what do they say? (Stage 2)



*'The more you read, the more things you will know. The more that you learn, the more places you'll go'.*

*Dr Seuss*

**Dr Helen Perkins, Tracey Edwards and June O'Sullivan MBE**

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Thank you to the members of the LEYF Men in Childcare Sounding Board

And to all the Nurseries that took part in the research

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# Introduction

June O’Sullivan, MBE and CEO of LEYF, said: “We need to have a diverse workforce with a variety of interaction styles, interests and approaches to teaching, regardless of gender. It should be about who teaches the activity the best.”

## Purpose of the Research

Whilst there has been significant interest from researchers and government to increase the number of males working in early childhood, much of the research focuses on the negative aspects of men working with young children such as safeguarding issues. The first report from LEYF, *‘Men Working in Childcare - Does it matter to children? What do they say?’* looked at the benefits of having male teachers in practice.

The original report findings concluded that attitudes to men working with children could be changed. There were some gendered patterns in that ‘girls playing with dolls chose female teachers.’ Other findings suggested that literacy, stories and singing were only associated with female staff.

This latest research is very much based on the original model, with the addition of some specific questions relating to literacy activities. The research is in honour of a great Early Years teacher, Sue Chambers who led the original research for Men in Childcare and who died in March this year .



## Stage 2 of the Research

The previous research suggested that children do not differentiate between staff members based on gender when selecting activities. That is however with the exception of literacy, where participating boys chose female teachers. This warranted further investigation.

Following training of the LEYF team, it was hoped to see an increase in children’s engagement with male teachers for story and singing activities.

### Research questions

- ◆ How do children perceive male teachers?
- ◆ How do children characterise their relationship with the male teachers ?
- ◆ Do children consistently choose staff they like for the activities they do well rather than the associate gender connection? ( For example choosing a woman to play football because she is really good rather than a man)?

We began by reviewing statistical and legislative changes of men in childcare in the UK, Europe and the rest of the world since the initial research was commissioned. The figures in the original research were now several years old and since then international research was showing a general trend of improvement of men in the workforce. In 2017 the UK Government published its tasks for reviewing recruitment and retention of men currently working in childcare.

This research itself is based on a participatory model and holds praxeological values. Teachers and children contribute to the research, which includes data collected through interview, co-constructed

drawings and collaborative narratives (built with the children). Photographs of familiar staff (male and female – with staff consent) were used to provoke dialogue. This dialogue was recorded for later thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The children’s responses to the photographs were analysed against a framework which includes discourse analysis and setting maps.

### Introduction to LEYF

LEYF is the UK’s leading childcare charitable social enterprise. It provides high quality, education and care in 37 Ofsted-registered nurseries by offering places for 4,700 children in 10 London boroughs. It is committed to excellence in Early Years education, training and research.

The child-centred approach is centre to everything LEYF does; it is underpinned by its values of Brave, Fun, Aspiring and Nurturing which underpin all its activities designed to achieve its ambition of changing the world one child at a time. LEYF remains as bold and creative as when it was first started back in 1903. LEYF has an action research model underpinning its commitment to quality and continually tests new ideas and dedication to stand up for what it believes in.

### Men Working in LEYF: The Numbers

At the time of writing, 8 of the 37 nurseries employ male staff. They comprised:

- ◆ 2 managers
- ◆ 1 deputy manager
- ◆ 5 nursery officers



- ◆ 1 apprentice.

Across the organisation 7.5% of staff are male staff, with the majority employed at Head Office.

### United Kingdom Statistics

According to an independently commissioned report by CEEDA ‘A focus on men in childcare’ (May 2017) there has been an increase of 2% in men now reported to be employed in the UK childcare sector. This increase from 3% to 5% has occurred over the past 4 years. In 2013 the DfE identified that typically men are employed in maintenance roles rather than senior practitioners positions, this data was not reported in the 2017 report, therefore it is unclear whether the number of males working directly with children has increased. The Scottish Government statistics report 4% of the daycare workforce are male (2018). Scotland is also providing a £50,000 fund to encourage men to engage in higher level Early Childcare and Education (ECEC) courses.

There appears a trend of younger men moving into the field. It is unclear however as to whether men are staying long term in the sector. So whilst this increase offers a favourable indication of change, the final incremental analysis is still unclear.

### European sStatistics

In 1996 the European Commission Network on Childcare set one of 40 targets as “**20 per cent of staff employed in collective services should be men.**” (1996, p. 24). Whilst moves are being made to improve the gender gap ‘*the SEEPRO (Early Education/care and Profession-*

There is too often a view that men are less likely to be nurturing and willing to be involved with children (Potter, Walker and Keen, 2012 ).

*alisation in Europe) Study project, in 17 of the 27 member states of the EU, male workers represent under one per cent of the workforce’ (Oberhuemer, Schreyer, and Neuman, 2010).*

Martin (2006) suggests that gender-neutral cultural practices are required, supporting more reflexive gender practices among the staff. Norway's focus on nature and outdoor play has demonstrated a strength and potentially the main reason for the high percentage of male workers in kindergartens there (Van Laere et al., 2014).

Findings by the European Commission still identify the Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) sector as predominantly female (2012). In Portugal, Iceland, Turkey and Norway, statistics show a higher national percentage of between 5%-7% of men within the workforce. Leading the field with 15% of male teachers is Norway and Denmark with a further 10% holding assistant positions (Eurostat, 2014). It is evident that European countries have begun to improve the professional image of men in teaching and childcare.

Positive discrimination has also supported many countries like Germany, Austria and Denmark to have made significant improvements in the diversification of their early years workforce.

### What Government says ?

In 2010 the target of 6% for male teachers working in childcare was dropped by the Coalition Government. Whilst the call for men to be part of the early



years has been muted as essential, the current Early Years Workforce Strategy (DfE, 2017b) only hints at the need for a task and finishing group to review the situation. Plans for this review were for the beginning of 2018, reports are still outstanding.

'We want children in Early Years provision to have both male and female role models to guide them through their Early Years, and we want more men to choose to work in the early years sector ( DfE, 2017, p.24)

Since the LEYF report in 2012 ( Chambers and O'Sullivan, 2012), The Fatherhood Institute (FI) initiated a campaign to increase men in the early years sector. DfE funded research in 2013-15 promoted local recruitment to childcare services. The Early Years Strategy ( DFE, 2017b) concluded that a task and finish group were needed to identify barriers to recruitment and retention. The report was due in early 2018 and is still outstanding.

### Current Government initiatives to prioritise literacy in the Early Years

A key finding from the original LEYF report was that children did not associate literacy activities with male teachers. In this research, we have a particular focus on male teachers, male children and their engagement in literacy activities.

Research commissioned by Save the Children identified that 'More boys than girls at age 5 are recorded as having poor early language skills and attention' (Moss and Washbrook, 2016, p.3). This gap continues throughout their education, having a long term impact on employability and social mobility

Education Secretary Damien Hinds is set to boost social mobility by halving the early years literacy gap by 2028, in a speech in 2018 he stated: '*... 28% - of children finish their reception year still without the early communication and reading skills they need to thrive. It's not acceptable and tackling it must be our shared priority. My ambition is to cut that number in half over the next ten years*' .

Focusing on early reading as early in a child's life as possible offers the opportunity for children to keep up with their peers even when from disadvantaged backgrounds. Children from disadvantaged backgrounds can be up to 12 months behind in their speech, language and reading when starting school in part due to the lack of available resources (Waldfoegel and Washbrook, 2010). The LEYF business model is designed to support 40% of children from disadvantaged backgrounds, therefore it is essential to maximise opportunities for reading and other literacy activities as Reay (1998) suggests that it more about the effectiveness of the time spent with children reading that was important.

Recommendations made by Lawton and Warren, (2015) through the Read On, Get On, (ROGO) propose argues that there needs to be focus on early years staff and their understanding of speech and language development. Literature also suggests that male adult role models play a significant part in supporting boys identity of self and the concept of 'maleness' (Alloway *et al.*, 2002).

Whilst there is still ongoing debate over professionalism and gender disparities within the early years what has remained a unanimous focus is the role of the early years workforce 'in maintaining and improving the quality of early childhood care and education' (Oberhuemer, 2011, p56).

### Men reading with children

Skelton (2003) has long since argued that the notion of gender provides an unsatisfactory platform on which to base recommendations of quality in teachers. Instead there is an argument for recognition of qualities portrayed by good practitioners as 'largely androgynous' (thus making claims of gender redundant) (Cushman, 2005, p.239). Cushman argues that what is needed is more balance in the workforce identifying competence over gender.

In 2012 the European Commission, acknowledged that people's literacy skills as adults are largely determined in their early years.

For those children lucky enough to be born into homes where there is a love of language, storytelling and songs. Where there is a loving relation-

ship between the parents and their young children they are in a position to do well. But many children do not grow up in such homes. As a result, not all children start primary school with good emergent literacy skills, and the knock on effects are felt throughout their lives (European Commission, 2012).

Relationships with young children are often female dominated and it is noted that women will read and talk to their children at home. However Clarke (2009) and Duursma, (2014) acknowledge the importance of Fathers and men in a child's learning and development.

It is remarkable that paternal book reading, not maternal book reading, is often the predicted of a higher level of story comprehension, book knowledge and language skills among children. Gleason (1975) and Bernstein-Ratner (1988) re-



ported that fathers used more complex language than mothers when interacting with their children (Bernstein-Ratner, 1988; Gleason, 1975 in Duursma 2014).

In terms of cost effectiveness; especially for socio-economically disadvantaged children, government

*Seeing fathers read in the home provides children with a positive role model, which is of great importance (especially for boys) and having fathers involved in reading activities is an important factor for later reading and school success. Given that the often low percentage of children who are read to by their fathers is primarily due to time constraints rather than a lack of awareness, the solution requires a shift in employment and social organisation, such as policies targeting work-life balance (Clarke, 2009).*

spending on Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) pays for itself many times over (European Commission, 2011). It is of benefit to children facing literacy challenges; including those whose home language differs from the language of the school.

Ashley, (2002, p.1) writes that *'If boys see men reading books and doing lots of neat writing, then boys will avidly read books and produce volumes of neat writing.'*



### The Continuing 'Gender Agenda'

The challenges to engaging men in childcare positions can come from societal and cultural expectations of the role of the man. As discussed in stage one of this research it is still rare to find men working in childcare.

A number of issues have been raised as to the possible cause of this phenomenon. It could be as Murray,(1996); Wood and Brownhill (2018) state that men are often perceived as male role models and father figures (Murray 1996).

Cushman (2005) argued that in highly gendered workforces such as primary and early years, men are often unconsciously assigned roles that reinforce dominant masculine traits.

It might be posited that men teachers are now subconsciously compelled to act in stereotypically male ways that perpetuate some of the less desirable facets of hegemonic masculinity ( Cushman, 2008, p.134) .

In her research Cushman found behaviour management, discipline, strength and manual labour were male expectations embedded deeply in to teaching cultures Men are often expected to demonstrate less caring and be more aligned with the preferences shown by boys when learning.



Some research argues that the passive artistic style associated with a feminine approach to teaching can at times 'turn off boys' (Biddulph, 1995). There is also a danger that men are required to overtly portray 'proper masculine' attributes to challenge paedophilic assumptions (Robinson, 2002).

The #GenderAction initiative, announced by the Mayor of London in 2018 aims to *'make lasting cultural change by recognising those striving to ensure there are no limits on young people reaching their full potential'* by challenging gender stereotypes.

Men are often pigeon holed for example sports experts and that can result in expectations that may lead gendered activities ( Brownhill and Oates, 2017). There are also covert expectations around the role of interacting with the children. Cushman (2005) reported that men were often discouraged from helping children get changed for physical activities. The subliminal messages modelled to the chil-

Men working in emotional labour such as teaching and child caring may call for special abilities that only women are deemed to possess (Hochschild, 1983).

dren emphasise a sense of suspicion for men. This is particularly prevalent when women are actively seen as above reproach in engaging with children

in this manner (Robinson, 2002; Cushman, 2005; p.15) Mistry and Sood, 2013 ).

These stereotypical gendered views still portray men as less nurturing and willing to be involved in children's lives (Potter, Walker and Keen, 2012).

### Male Role Models

Further to the expectations that men will be fully engaging in masculine activities there is also an added dimension which suggest men in teaching will also be available to act as a father figures or even stand in for absent fathers (Wood and Brownhill, 2018).

Stage one research acknowledged that 84% of parents would be happy for young children to be in the care of men ,there was also a consensus that what parents particularly wanted was a male role model, particularly for the boys (Owen, 2003).

Further research suggests that men do respond differently to children, whether that be obvious through types of play or by behaviours such as 'being silly' (Webb, 2017 p.6). Wood and Brownhill, (2017) also suggest that male teachers often perceive their role to include positive male role modelling. In essence there are assumptions made that a positive role model is absent in some children's lives. Arguably research also suggests that men working in childcare can also influence children to move beyond stereotypical images of what it means to be male ( Hutchings *et al.*, 2007). and presumably female?

Webb argues that for men, often the focus when engaging with children, is about more in tune with 'the what of doing rather than the how of doing' (Webb, 2017,p8).

Whilst many studies identify is the differences in gendered approaches to learning. Huber and Traxl, (2017) maintain that boys may indeed seek to engage more with male teachers. While not yet conclusive, this research does suggest that '[boys] have a fundamental need for same gender exchange and identification' (Huber and Traxl, 2017,

### Listening to children

In stage one of this research ( Chambers and O'Sullivan, 2012) the voice of staff and children were an important part of the design and recording of data. Harcourt, Perry and Waller (2011) acknowledge that a child's perspective through a participatory framework can be powerful in obtaining a greater understanding of a child's day to day experiences. By using child-cantered methods research has demonstrated that life in childcare can be explored.



Several studies such as the research undertaken by Alison Clarke 's 2001 Mosaic Approach enables a much richer narrative . A range of high quality case studies has supported research that offers children's perspectives in what Mayall (2002) calls the 'looking up' approach.

By looking up from the child's perspective rather than down from the adults we gain greater understanding of the context of children's' lives .

In research by Clark and Moss ( 2001, 2005) use of the 'mosaic approach' enables the child to have a voice ( UNCRC,1991). By participating in the research the child became an active agent of change.

Corsaro (2005) argues that children do not simply copy what they see and hear , but that they engage in changing culture and society simply by being a part of it.

***Our starting point was that young children can be competent research participants, with rights to be treated as such'*** (Christensen and James, 2008)

In the context of research with children one of the main conclusions has been that when enabling children to fully participate we resolve a power imbalance between adult and child (Harcourt, Perry and Waller, 2011).

It is also important to recognise that it is the children themselves that should be *'the primary source of knowledge about their own views and experiences'* (Alderson 2008, p287).



# Methodology

In this report we explore children’s views about whether the gender of the staff impacts their choice of activities. We focus specifically on nurseries where children have access to male and female teachers. Men in childcare is the subject of much debate; thus, there is a need to recognise the complexity of the issue and identify what value there is to the children in employing males in early years settings.

This research is mainly qualitative and based in a sociocultural perspective, which stresses the impact and importance of interactions between children and the culture in which they live (Vygotski, 1929). The methods are participatory and are based on praxeological values by involving teachers as research partners. Researching in this way provides an opportunity for transformation as the teacher-researchers have shared ownership of research and its outcomes (Formosinho and Formosinho, 2012; Pascal and Bertram 2012). The study used a mixed methods approach, for our purpose interviews and a focus group were appropriate data collection instruments.

Data were collected through interviews with the children and collaborative narratives drawn from the researchers in a focus group discussion, with

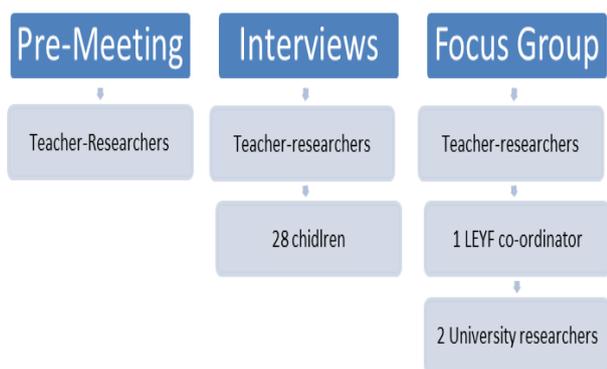
the teacher- researchers, were analysed. drawing on discourse and thematic analysis as a methodological framework (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Discourse and thematic analysis is grounded in a social constructivist and socio-cultural approach which apply ideas from the analyses to issues and concepts. Our key analytics are interactions, choice and reason. Transcripts were analysed in terms of how concepts of gender stereotypes affect how and why children make choices in terms of gender and activity.

## Participants and Data Collection points

### Interviews

Trust is an important part of this research process as children are involved. Therefore, teachers who are familiar to the children conducted the interviews (Flewitt, 2014). Nurseries were briefed as to the nature of the study and consented to participate. Interviews were carried out in the children’s nurseries by familiar teachers. Each teacher-researcher identified four children (two male, two female). There is a potential issue in respect of validity in using a number of researchers, therefore, prior to commencing interviews with the children, the teacher-researchers met to agree on their understanding of the process and to agree the descriptions of the types of play.

Photographs of familiar staff (male and female) and images of a range of play activities were used to



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lead the discussion with the children

- Superhero play
- Cooking
- Construction e.g. Lego, junk modelling
- Science experiments (mini-beast activity. We said this activity must involve a member of staff holding the insect)
- Dolls (washing)
- Stories and songs
- Football
- Trains
- Skipping ropes

In addition, the children were asked to talk about:

- Who takes care of you here at nursery ?
- What kind of games and activities you do like at nursery?
- Let's think about stories / books – who do you like to share stories / books with
- (Choose a male photo) What stories/ books do share with .....
- Choose female photo What stories/ books do share with .....
- What is your favourite song (at nursery) who sings with you?

These additional questions were in response to the findings from the previous report which found that children chose female teachers for reading and singing (Chambers and O'Sullivan , 2012). Age appropriate scripts were used for researchers to introduce the activity to the children to ensure they understand their right to 'play'. Permission was sought confirming that the child would like to participate in the activity. This included an age appropriate explanation that the data will be used to tell other people about what children like

to do in nursery. As stated earlier, we wanted to give voice to the children's thoughts and feelings about their experiences in nursery (Nutbrown, 2018). One to one semi-structured interviews seemed to us to be the most appropriate method to enable the children to articulate and explain their choices in their own words.

Interviews were conducted weekly over a three-week period to ascertain a consistent. For the most part children were open to participate, in one setting, one male child chose not to participate fully, and therefore his data has been excluded.

## Focus Group

The focus group comprised 6 teacher-researchers who conducted the interviews with the children, 2 researchers from the University and the LEYF coordinator. The focus group allowed for triangulation of the data (Greene, 2013), albeit from different perspectives and sources, which according to Onwuegbuzie and Leech (2005) can provide broad yet focused perspective. They suggest

*Pragmatic researchers also are more able to combine empirical precision with descriptive precision [...] Also, armed with a bi-focal lens (i.e. both quantitative and qualitative data), rather than with a single lens, pragmatic researchers are able to zoom in to microscopic detail or to zoom out to indefinite scope. As such, pragmatic researchers have the opportunity to combine the macro and micro levels of a research issue. (p.383)*

This description resonated with our mixed method approach. To answer the research questions the core component of the study had to be the children's qualitative views. However, the teacher-researchers' supplementary qualitative data have

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been used to enhance the children’s stories, locating them contextually and temporally and offer insight where there is significant agreement or disagreement with a particular concept and to add rich, dialogic, qualitative, data (Krueger and Casey, 2015). Kamberelis and Dimitriadis (2011) discuss the potential of focus groups to produce weak evidence; this was not the case in this research as the participants were able to not only amplify the children’s voices but also were highly reflexive in their discussions.

Reflection on practice is recognised as an important component in developing professional and pedagogical knowledge, and in understanding practice (Miller 2008, Schön, 1987). This raises questions regarding the multifaceted and gendered self-

*We’re focused on developing children’s natural curiosity and confidence so they leave nursery as inquisitive explorers who love learning. **Using academic research, partnerships with international early years organisations and our own internal action research, we’ve created our own unique curriculum with seven key areas.** (LEYF PEDAGOGY)*

concepts of early years teachers and socially constructed gender identities of young children. As can be seen from our analysis, participants frequently referred to the value of gendered practical abilities and were reflective in terms of the messages children receive about gendered activities from their practices. As such the specific focus here will be on the children’s talk in relation to their preferences for male and female teachers’ engagement and teachers’ self-concepts in relation to gendered practices.

## Ethics

The child’s age and competencies were taken in to account in ensuring that children were afforded opportunities for decision-making and respect in the

exercise of their rights (UN,1991), while being protected in accordance with their age and still evolving

*... we cannot suspend our beliefs, separate our experience or delete our memories because our experiences will be inextricably linked with how we view and analyse the data we collect during our research (Musgrave, 2019)*

capacities. Children’s participation rights were attended to by researchers noticing and valuing children and their potential contribution to research and ensuring that children have information and a choice about participation, including the right not to participate. To reduce any potential issues of power imbalance, staff the children are familiar with collected the data. Data collection took place in the child’s familiar environment.

Children volunteered to join in with the research, there was no to coercion participate or consequence to not participating. Here we note that 2 children chose not to participate in the follow up interviews. Issues for the teacher-researchers and the wider staff team were considered. For example, if it were found that practice was gendered in some settings the consequences need to be clear. The organisation has a culture of research-based practice, in which findings from research are an opportunity to improve. The approach enabled children’s voices to be heard, and their experiences valued and respected. For the teachers, an opportunity to reflect on and improve practice is in line with the organisations philosophy.

It is therefore concluded that ethical practice, in line with BERA (2018) and ERIC, guidance was followed.

## Analysing the data

The data from the children’s interviews were presented by the teacher-researchers at the focus group; this discussion was recorded. The audio re-

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coding was transcribed, and along with the written data from the children's interviews was analysed using content and thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). There is a challenge to representing single voices of all of the children, therefore in some cases the responses have been conflated in to that of a group to reflect the children's shared experiences (Krippendorff, 2013) thus 'turning up the volume' of the children's voices (Clough 1998, p.129).

The analysis and interpretation is multi-layered, much like the data collection methods. Although collected from children and the teacher-researchers, bringing their experiences together allowed us to identify common elements as well as differences in their experiences. Rapley (2011) suggests this layering is a strength of qualitative research.

The data from the interviews and focus group is

*We're focused on developing children's natural curiosity and confidence so they leave nursery as inquisitive explorers who love learning.*

*Using academic research, partnerships with international early years organisations and our own internal action research, we've created our own unique curriculum with seven key areas. (LEYF PEDAGOGY)*

both qualitative and quantitative. The quantitative data provided an overview of the children's preferences and enabled analysis by gender, by setting and by the nurseries staff profile by gender. This first layer is presented first, to create a profile of the participants and their preferences. (see findings section).

As previously discussed, there is little evidence to explore children's perceptions of their teachers' gender and how this impacts on their choices. Therefore it was important to us that before pre-

senting the qualitative data that we established a clear picture of children's views.

The second layer of analysis included the teacher-researchers analysis of the children's interviews. This qualitative data added useful description of context, including time, place and knowledge of the children's home and family life.

The third layer came from the teacher researchers' deeply reflexive discussion in the focus group, holding a mirror to their own practice, values and beliefs, which added a complex layer of thinking which has informed the findings and the recommendations.

# Findings

Findings from activity with children collected by teacher researchers

From the 12 settings that took part in the research only 7 sets of data were analysed for these findings. This was due to time restraints on the setting and staffing and in some cases a misunderstanding of the processes. Staff from the 7 settings included 7 managers, 3 male and 4 females and a total of 109 staff. This consisted of 99 female staff (72 full-time including 4 managers and 22 part-time) and 10 Male staff (10 full-time including 3 managers). This puts male staff at just over 9% of the total staffing which is 7% above the national average.

*A little under two thirds of the children chose female staff. This was a significant finding as in three of the settings the only male teacher was also the manager.*

*Children were then asked to choose the teachers they would like to play with from range of activities with (Table 2). Significantly these findings demonstrated that in some settings there was an equal choice of staff gender. It also highlighted the settings where the male teaching staff (and in some cases the only male manager) as being particularly proactive in engaging with the children for them to have been chosen.*

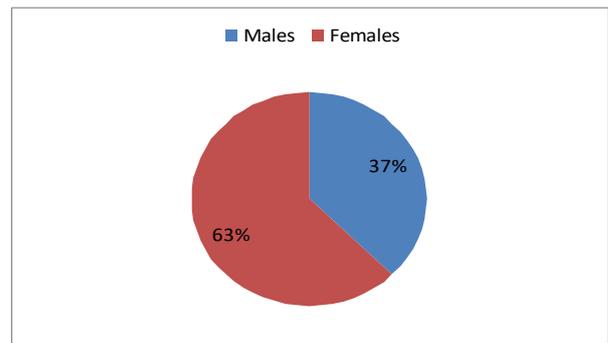


Table One: Which Teacher do you like to do your favourite activity with?

## Choices of activities and Teachers gender

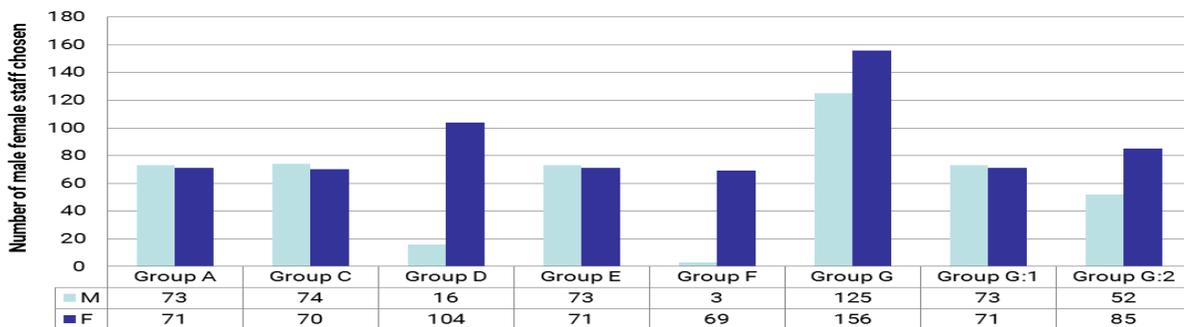


Table two: Which Teacher do you like to do your favourite activity with?

Not

surpris-

ingly we found that given the difference in the number of males and females employed in the LEYF nurseries female teachers were chosen more than 50% of the time by children when reviewing activities.

# Findings

## Who takes care of you at nursery?

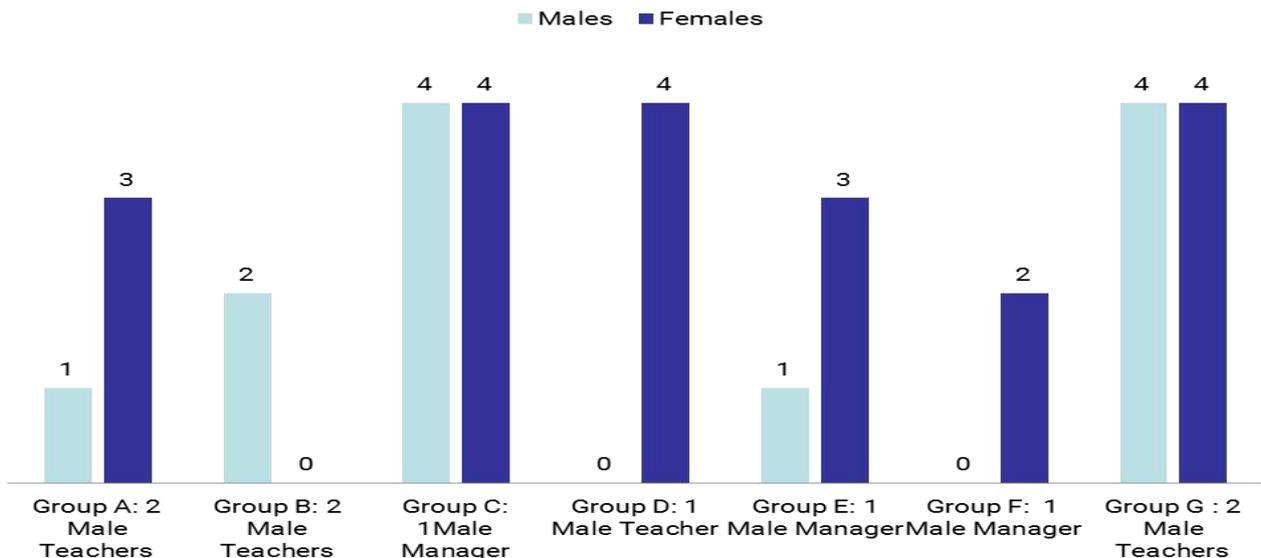


Table three : Which teacher do you like to do your favourite activity ?

What is good to note here is that following on from the previous research; where children chose only females staff in certain activities, this was not the case here. It became clear that children do not choose activities by gender but by the person who is 'good' at that particular activity. This correlates with Cushman's (2008) findings about the androgynous nature of teaching. It was not evident in either their choices nor in their comments that gender played any significant factor in their choices.

We then asked the children who 'cared for them at nursery?'

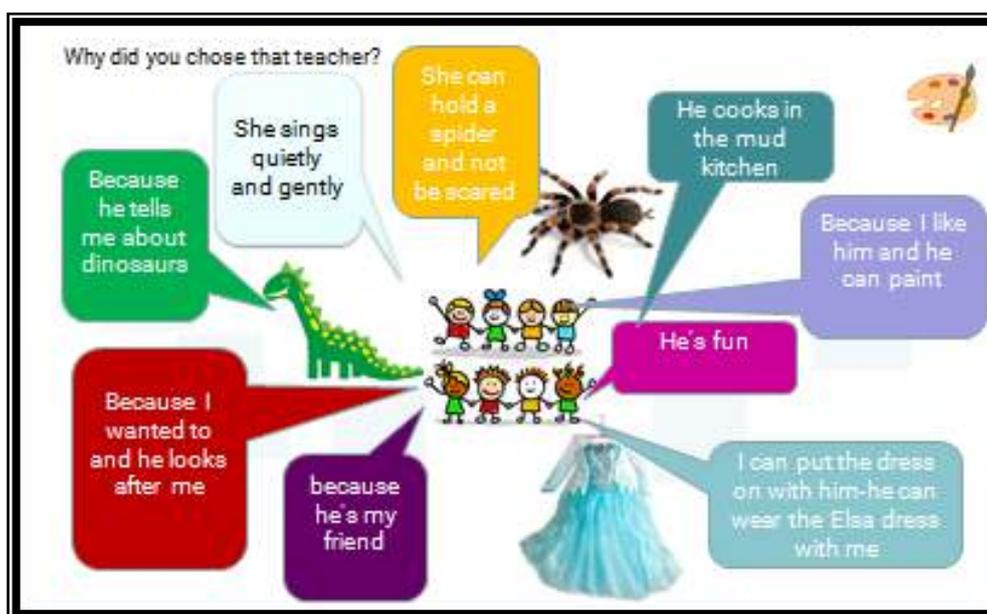
Here we noted an anomaly in the data. Group C and G scored equally in the choices of male and female teachers chosen to be caring. In Group C there was 1 Male manager ( 6% of the staff team) and in group G there was 2 Male teachers ( 7% of the staff team). This conflicted with the data from Group B ( 12.5% of the staff team) and Group F ( 7 % of the staff team) where either no female staff were chosen or no male staff were chosen. We hypothesised that it was the presence of the staff within the setting and that if male teachers were perhaps seen intermittently or not as fully engaged then the children responded by not choosing them. This may have been significant in the way children chose from the female teachers in the setting but because the percentage of females was higher this was not as evident on how children made their choices. This data seemed to confirm that the relationships between the children and the teachers was important and influenced their choices over who the children would engage with. This appeared more significant than the gender of the individual.

'Where males are visible in the setting, and seen to be engaging in all activities, not just as 'a novelty event' children do not associate the activity with the gender' (Brownhill and Oates, 2017). Research

# Findings

by Cabera *et al.* 2000) shows that mothers are associated with food, comfort, security, and love, while fathers are associated with fun, excitement, and play. Children need exposure to both types of adult interactions. However, most preschool environments favour women’s interaction styles, verbal and literacy activities, and socio-dramatic play.

In settings where the manager was male ( and at times the only male) we found variations in the choices children made. Settings where managers or male teaching staff engagement was high children chose male and female staff equally. This was also significant in the settings with the same percentages of male teachers where they had not been chosen by the children.



We explored this with the focus group as well as individually recorded comments from the children to try to ascertain if a conscious effort had been made by the managers to be visible daily, and engage in range of activities with the children where there is only one male teacher. By asking children about both male and female teachers, it is important to note that generally the comments were similar for both male and female. The comments showed some positive progress in that children saw both male and female teachers as performing activities contrary to gender stereotypes. It could be assumed that perhaps the mud kitchen appeals more to male however we also had girls choosing a male teacher in one setting for cooking, and from the focus group we understand he does on a regular basis. Children generally chose teachers who were good at particular things which they enjoyed. Children also offered comments which are located in relationships for example, 'because I like him', 'because he looks after me,' were amongst comments made by both boys and girls and about both male and female teachers.

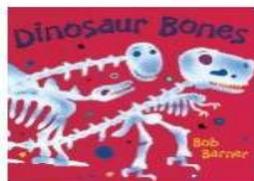
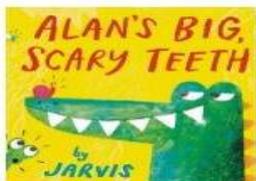
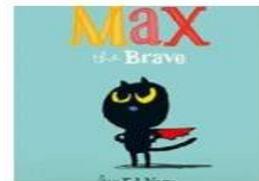
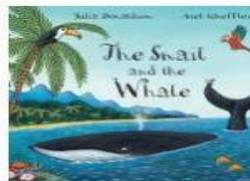
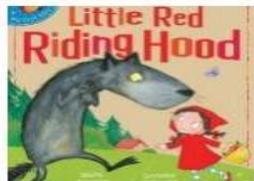
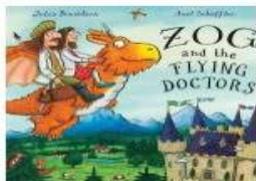
## Findings



Children told the researchers that they were read to by both male and female teachers. This is an improvement from the previous research. From this focus group we ascertained that in the nursery led by a male manager, reading is one of the activities he leads regularly. There were some very good examples of how and when reading took place...

*'I will often lie on the floor with two or three children and read the book, holding the book in the air'  
'In the morning when the children arrive and have breakfast I sit on the [LEYF] sofa and read with children in small groups or individually.'*

*(Male Teachers examples of good practice discussed in focus group)*



Female teachers were mentioned as being good at playing trains, superheroes and playing with the cars. It would be easy to think that this was where there were female only staff in the setting however it is not the case. So, what is emerging is that children are being exposed to a range of activities and are beginning not to attach a particular stereotypical gender identity to it.

Over the past thirty years there has been significant changes in the roles and responsibilities of men and women. In the context of family there are new sets of expectations, beliefs, and attitudes about what men and women should do (Cabera et al., 2000). This next generation of boys and girls will be more likely to experience mothers who work full time outside the home and fathers who cook dinner. Consequently, children are being reared with different expectations about their future roles and those

# Discussion

The study found that for the majority of children selected, both male and female teachers share activities such as reading and singing which is a clear improvement from previous research conducted by LEYF in 2012.

However, in certain settings male and female teachers are still unconsciously expressing gendered stereotypical behaviours and there needs to be awareness of this to ensure children are seeing a balance.

In nurseries where a teacher is 'good at something', that person is often left to do that activity, such as gardening. Whilst this is neither right or wrong, children need to see both male and female teachers engaging in all activities – particularly those where there is a perception of an activity being better suited to either girls or boys.

*“children are interested in the play of the other sex, regardless of whether or not they participate.” (Edwards, Knoche and Kumru , 2001, p813)*

This initiative was led by LEYF as part of its aim to provide truly inclusive education and continually examining how to ensure they are aware of the impact of attitudes on behaviour.

If teachers are to cultivate gender diversity across the sector, children must see a diverse society reflected in their nurseries, says LEYF, which means a balance of high-quality male and female teachers who are able to be 'good at' activities which may initially have been perceived to be gendered. So, ultimately all staff will learn to plait hair, pick up worms, fix broken equipment or crawl under a bush in the garden and become more conscious of their unconscious bias. Children need high quality teachers, male and female, who are able to be 'good at' activities which may be perceived to be gendered.

- Children associate the activity with the person not

gender (balance)

- Where males are visible in the setting, and seen to be engaging in all activities, not just as 'a novelty event' children do not associate the activity with the gender.

- In some settings, where men seen in nurturing roles is the norm, masculine and feminine attributes are equally valued.

- There can be a tendency in some areas fall back on gender stereotypes when faced with activities that are not a favourite or are unpleasant.

- Challenging children's gendered assumptions opens up dialogue that allows for other possibilities –not limiting to a gendered norm.

*Children need to see our diverse society reflected in their nurseries, it is not just about gender but the opportunity for children to have choice. It is the characteristics and attributes of the Teacher that provides a rich learning environment that allows all children to embrace positive non-stereotypical gendered behaviours”.*

**Troubling Gender stereotypes, questions that need to be asked:**

- ⇒ *are we facilitating equality of opportunity through provision of resources (including for staff) for open choices?*
- ⇒ *are we following children's lead but inadvertently reinforcing gender stereotypes?*
- ⇒ *are we unconsciously ( as staff) reinforcing gender bias through language and actions?*

## Discussion

*'If the male is demonstrating it, then you see it in the children's behaviour-it's not so black and white about it's a boy thing or a girl thing-it's not about the manliness of a man it's almost the opposite it's about a man showing the opposite for grey bits between the black and the white'*

Our findings are ambivalent about children's awareness of teachers' gender when choosing activities however our findings are concerned with gendered behaviours, attitudes and bias.

The findings cause us to consider gender, not as being the black and white of being male or female (biological construct) and to think about social construction of masculinity and femininity (Butler, 2006) and the behaviours and beliefs attributed to gender equality.

*Attributions and characteristics belong to people not genders. Children need to see non-stereotypical characteristics, attitudes and behaviours evident in both sexes; there is a need for balance.*



*'our boys do dress up... For them it's the 'visualness' of it, if they see it every day (for example in our story time with drag queens). Parents are often ones that don't like it. Children see me in a big hat and high heels, it's the normality of it.... just because he's in a dress doesn't mean he's being a princess'*

### Good Examples in LEYF

- Male and female teachers join in dressing up
- Male and female teachers read with and to children
- Male and female teachers sing with and to children
- It's part of the LEYF pedagogy, to have sofas and to have snuggle time

### Behaviours

- Girls like rough and tumble/ risky play activities.
- In female only settings, boys and girls named teachers who engaged in this type of play
- Where there are proactive male teachers, children chose equally between male and female teachers with whom to play .

In some settings girls favoured male teachers more than boys for their favourite .

What we have found is that in some settings, there are some practices that unconsciously allow or reinforce gender stereotypical behaviours

- ◆ **'when we have more boys we have more rough and tumble play'**
- ◆ **'... he throws them up in the air'**

In nurseries where a teacher is 'good at something' then in general that person is left to do that activity for example, gardening , singing, roleplay and singing. However, we are not suggesting that this is not acceptable unlike, much of the literature that advocates for gender neutral behaviours .

We argue that children need to see both male and female teachers engaging in activities, particularly those where there is a perception of being a girls or boys activity.

## Conclusions

In summary, what matters to children is the 'here and now'. What matters to them is who is 'good' at that specific activity and this is not linked to any gender stereotypical activities. We found that children do not really have a preference. What matters is the level of expertise, with children making comments like 'he is really good at dinosaurs', or 'I like playing football with her because 'she's good at it.'

Some responses did contain gendered language, however for the most part where we asked questions about caring and nurturing or books and games, the choices included both male and female teachers. The data suggest that the children in these LEYF nurseries are not making choices based on gender. For the children in this report, what was important was the relationships they have with the teachers.



The original report found that boys often didn't choose men for literacy activities such as reading and singing, which might be considered to be more caring and intimate (feminized) actions. LEYF has invested in training and development in this area, and as a result, there are many examples of good practice, from both male and female teachers, with children not having a bias towards female teachers.



What we found, in line with the literature (Butler, 2008, Cushman, 2005) is a need for gender flexible pedagogies, and how we can remove bias from practice and raise awareness of whether staff are perpetuating or challenging stereotypes.

Some practice does still feature unconscious gender stereotyping. This is a challenge for Early Childhood professionals to be aware of how their own values and beliefs may influence children's expectations of gender. If children see us doing something, they will follow. *It should be as normal for men to dress up or change nappies as it is for women*, although we need to make sure we celebrate women doing this too. It is about everyone being seen to do everything.

When we talk about men in childcare we want to talk about why. We need men to be role models for both boys and girls, and for women to be role models too, otherwise we are limiting children's life chances and choices.

The idea of 50% of staff being male seems almost impossible at this point, but more of a balance is certainly achievable. This is the most influential time of children's lives and we must take advantage of it before they enter much more gendered environments, such as primary school, where the majority of teachers are female, or secondary, where they are predominantly male. Children can realise that every opportunity is for them.

# Recommendations

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One of the key findings in this research is that good practice is seen where teachers (male and female) act consciously to avoid perpetuating gender stereotypical behaviours. To capitalise on these areas of good practice it is important for all working with children to raise awareness of possible unconscious bias within their practice and incurious coding of activities and resources.

The next step for the University of Wolverhampton and LEYF partnership is to create an audit tool which can be used not only within LEYF but across the Early Childhood sector. We particularly want to follow up on the literacy activities and boy's engagement, as we have seen some very good practice.

We would like to extend the research beyond LEYF to capture other examples of good practice. We will look to develop partnerships with other researchers (national and international) and organisations exploring gender in Early Childhood for example Gender Action.

A further challenge of encouraging more men to work within early childhood education and care is not unique to the United Kingdom. As a further development from this research we will endeavor to engage with colleagues internationally to pull together a fund of knowledge to inform policy and practice.

The voice of the child is important in matters that affect their lives (UNICEF, 2016). This study exemplifies the value of the LEYF pedagogy, which foregrounds the power of children's voices when their perspectives are genuinely sought, and the difficulties facing many adults who work with them, in genuinely placing children's perspectives at the centre of their practice.

## Thoughts for pedagogical practices

- ⇒ Review and share the practice of settings demonstrating a balance of non-gendered choices.
- ⇒ Through reflections and observation consider if there is a difference in the language used between when engaging children from male and female teachers?
- ⇒ Story time is it structured to be inclusive to all children including those who do not wish to sit quietly?
- ⇒ Snuggle time -is this happening in all settings and with both male and female teachers?
- ⇒ Where there is only one male teacher is there engagement in all aspects of practice, not just as a 'novelty event'?
- ⇒ Are teachers unconsciously coding activities as male or female?
- ⇒ Are teachers' personal values and beliefs unconsciously impacting on their behaviours?

## Final thoughts

As educators we have a socio-cultural responsibility to provide children with the best possible life chances uninhibited by old fashioned gender stereotypes. To this end we need to be aware of how we use the word 'Gender', as it assumes a shared set of characteristics and attributes which are masculine and feminine. This is not the 21st century reality England. It's not just about gender, but how we use this debate to consider all aspects of inclusivity and children's awareness of this. Children need to see our diverse society reflected in their nurseries.

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