# Oppositional Discourses: deconstructing responses to investigations of male early childhood educators

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ABSTRACT This reflective account begins with verses representing the multiplicity of frequently oppositional responses generated by the author's investigations of the perceptions, experiences and contributions of male early childhood educators. Discourses underpinning these responses are identified. They include (1) male as victim; (2) non-critical advocacy for an increased male presence in early childhood education; (3) critiques of interpretive research; (4) feminist perspectives; and (5) the 'traditional' early childhood stance. Each of these discourses is then briefly deconstructed to identify contested assumptions about the participation of men in the early childhood sector and to provide a meta-view of the key issues involved. It is argued that prevailing discourses ignore the voices of children and constrain conceptualisations of possible contributions by male early childhood educators. The article concludes with a call for more inclusive and more flexible discursive spaces in which to explore the potential implications of the involvement of men in early childhood education.

### Prologue

Voice 1: a male early childhood teacher-director falsely accused of child sexual assault:

*I've dropped the ball, he said*
*Can you come? I need to talk.*
*JAMES STRAFE \* IS A PAEDOPHILE*
*Was spray-painted*
*All over the childcare centre's wall.*

*They wanted to play the whole thing down.*
*'But James', they said, 'Such a little thing*
*Done at night, there for only a few hours.*
*Being a director is a demanding job*
*You've got to accept the stress involved'.*

*It might not seem such a big thing — to them*
*But it's taken from me something I once thought nothing could.*
*Broken something inside, destroyed the warmth and empathy*
*So that now, I feel like saying*
*'Don't come near me, don't touch me, just stay away'*
*Even with my own children.*

*I knew it was inevitable – a time bomb ticking away*
*I've loved my job but the costs have been enormous*
*I used to think I was invincible, but not any more.*
*Thanks for listening to something that*
*So many people choose to ignore*
*Maybe some good will come of it, further down the track.*

Voice 2: a spokesperson for a network group established to encourage greater male participation in the early childhood workforce:

*It's so easy to sensationalise; that's what people expect to hear.*
*But steer away from negative publicity; we get too much of that.*
*We need balance, propaganda even.*
*So focus on the positive, don't tell that story*
*Write about us instead.*

Voice 3: self as researcher within an interpretivist tradition:

*But it's a powerful human narrative*
*That surely deserves to be told.*
*Yes, it is only one's man story,*
*But it would resonate with many more.*

Voice 4: editors and reviewers of feminist journals:

*A disappointing paper*
*That complicitly perpetuates patriarchal norms*
*By encouraging the reader*
*To feel sorry for the subject and his ilk.*
*Deconstruct your discourse!*
*Adopt a critical interpretive lens!*
*Hegemonic masculinities, unproblematised gendered practices*
*Must be your focus if we are to publish this.*

Voice 5: funding bodies affiliated with the early childhood sector:

*We regret that we are unable to recommend funding*
*For a project that focuses on such a small minority*

> *Not a high priority for us at all.*
> *Besides we* know *why there aren't*
> *More male early childhood teachers*
> *And, quite frankly, don't much care.*

\* 'James Strafe' is a pseudonym

## Introduction

I begin this article with verses encapsulating the multiple, frequently discordant discourses generated in response to my research into the perceptions, experiences and contributions of male early childhood educators. My purpose is to reflect on the expectations, assumptions and agendas that investigations of male involvement in early childhood education, in my experience, seem to precipitate. More specifically, I attempt to (1) deconstruct some of these responses and the discourses in which they are embedded; (2) identify some of the tensions evident within and between these discourses; (3) discuss how each discourse potentially assists or hinders the promotion of gender equity in early childhood education; and (4) suggest how current conversations about the involvement of men in early childhood education might be enriched and extended.

## Self as Researcher

My interest in investigating issues associated with the involvement of male professionals in the care and education of young children arises primarily from my work as a teacher educator in an early childhood pre-service programme. I have become increasingly conscious of the disproportionately small number of males who enter our programme (typically no more than 2% of total enrolments) and the incrementally smaller numbers who eventually graduate, enter the profession after graduation, and make a long-term career commitment to the field. These figures have been a disappointment, as many of these male early childhood teacher education candidates appear to have much to offer young children and their families. My interest in issues associated with male early childhood educators was also fuelled by my experience, a decade ago, when, as a teacher of young children, a male colleague whom I much admired was subsequently convicted of multiple counts of child sexual abuse.

Essentially, my research is situated within an interpretive tradition that emphasises respect for personal experience and gives priority to understanding the meaning that individuals make of their experience (Garrick, 1999). An important criterion of interpretive research, therefore, is fidelity or preserving 'what it means to be the teller of the tale' (Blumenfeld-Jones, 1995, p. 26). I had envisaged continuing within this interpretivist tradition as I investigated and wrote about male early childhood educators. The more involved I became in research into issues surrounding male early childhood educators, however, the

more embroiled I became in what Coffey (1999, p. 11) describes as the 'complex set of arguments about how gender should be researched' and how gender-related issues should be represented.

### Oppositional Discourses

My initial attempts to publish a narrative account of one man's reflections on his decade as an early childhood educator, culminating in the false accusation of child sexual abuse (Sumsion, 1999a) – and to obtain research funding to pursue issues arising from this account – generated vigorous and conflicting responses. These responses are depicted in the verses in the prologue to this article, each representing a different voice:

(1) a male early childhood teacher–director falsely accused of child sexual assault;
(2) a spokesperson for a network group established to encourage greater male participation in the early childhood workforce;
(3) self as researcher working within an interpretivist tradition;
(4) editors and reviewers of feminist journals; and
(5) funding bodies affiliated with the early childhood sector.

Each verse consists of verbatim fragments selected for their potential to illuminate these multiple and diverse responses. The first three verses represent the voices of individuals; the final two an amalgam of people in these respective positions. The oppositional discourses underpinning these responses challenged my previous understandings of gender and research and how they intersect.

Like Reed (1999), I use *discourse* to mean:

*a regulated and regulative body of ideas and sets of knowledges which delimit the kinds of questions we can ask, the ways in which we might make sense of the world, the potential pathways for further development and insight, with powerful discourses becoming 'regimes of truth' (Foucault, 1972) and competing discourses delineating domains of conflict, disjuncture and change. (p. 94)*

The competing discourses evident in the voices represented in the prologue can be described as: (1) male as victim; (2) non-critical advocacy for an increased male presence in early childhood education; (3) critiques of interpretive research; (4) feminist perspectives; and (5) the 'traditional' early childhood stance. In what follows, I deconstruct each of these discourses to identify possible consequences of an increased male presence in the early childhood sector. Throughout, I return frequently to the verses in the prologue. I also draw on additional case study material from the larger, ongoing programme of research from which the narrative account referred to previously was taken.

**Discourse 1: male as victim**

The 'male as victim' discourse represented by Voice 1 reflects the pain of a man who has become a scapegoat of hegemonic, or socially dominant, gender stereotyping that perpetuates traditional gender norms (Connell, 1995). These norms render highly suspect the motives of men who choose to violate traditional gender roles by becoming professionally involved in the care and education of young children. Indeed, men who choose to work in a capacity that requires intimate physical involvement with young children are commonly assumed to harbour paedophile tendencies (Skelton, 1991; Murray, 1996; King, 1998). The 'moral panic' evident in this assumption is compounded by a potent blend of (i) misconceptions that men who elect to work with young children are necessarily homosexual; (ii) homophobia; and (iii) the common tendency to conflate homosexuality with paedophilia (Silin, 1995, 1997). This moral panic, evident in the intense media focus on child sexual abuse and the increasing surveillance of early childhood educators (Silin, 1997; Duncan, 1999), underpins the 'time-bomb syndrome' referred to by the male 'victim' whose voice we hear in the first four verses.

As normative gender expectations sanction women's involvement in the nurturing of young children, female early childhood educators face relatively little likelihood of being falsely accused of child sexual abuse. The second verse in the prologue hints at a possible tendency within the early childhood sector to overlook the essentially gender-specific concerns of those male early childhood educators who perceive they are particularly vulnerable to false accusations of child sexual assault. Failure to address these concerns, other than in ways that focus on surveillance and thus inevitably fuel rather than refute suspicions of sexual abuse, conceivably could constitute subtle discrimination against men (Sumsion, 1999b). While generally unintended, subtle discrimination can have pernicious effects (Benokraitis, 1997), including the fostering of a 'victim' perspective amongst some male early childhood educators, and seemingly apparent in the opening verses in the prologue. From a gender reform perspective, there is a danger that male early childhood educators who perceive themselves victimised because of their gender may lose sight of the power, choice and opportunities that the broader contemporary sociocultural political context continues to confer on men as a group (Connell, 1995). This possibility seems evident in the following comment by a male student teacher about his experiences during practicum and as a relief childcare worker:

> *It's a case of not feeling welcome, a feeling of 'We don't want males around'. So you're caught in this situation where you're getting mixed messages. Women want equal rights and gender equality yet you still feel that they want to dominate childcare, that they still want it to be a woman's world. What do they want? Do they want men to care for children, too? Or do they just want us to back out, and to carry on complaining that men don't give enough care to children?*

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This excerpt suggests that failure to distinguish between personal and sociocultural political contexts can lead disaffected men to attribute their distress to efforts to promote gender equity, rather than to the constrictions of hegemonic gender norms (Schwalbe, 1996; Mills & Lingard, 1997; Messner, 1998). Men who perceive themselves as victims, therefore, could seek to preserve and perpetuate normative gender roles. There is no place, feminists argue, for men with these intentions in early childhood education.

What feminist discourses sometimes seem reluctant to acknowledge, however, is that attempts to subvert conventional masculinities can generate considerable emotional distress and turmoil (Connell, 1995). Men engaged in these endeavours, therefore, may need support. Documenting the experiences of men who challenge conventional perceptions of masculinity by working with young children might be one means of providing support. Such documentation might also assist in initiating and furthering conversations about gender issues in early childhood education and how the early childhood sector might pursue gender reform. Others disagree, and argue that focusing on men's difficulties condones, even cultivates, a victim perspective. This stance is evident in the verse in the prologue representing the voices of some feminist editors and reviewers.

### Discourse 2: non-critical advocacy for an increased male presence in early childhood education

Non-critical advocates for more involvement by men in early childhood education, on the other hand, have few reservations about the potential impact of an increased male presence. Tending either to ignore or dismiss feminist concerns, they argue many advantages would arise, including positive male role models for children (Farquhar, 1997) and increased status and improved working conditions for early childhood educators (Powderly & Westerdale, 1998). These proponents usually allude to the importance of a achieving a 'critical mass' of men – defined by Chilwinak (1997) as the minimum 12% minority participation required to sustain a viable minority presence. Otherwise, they imply, individual men risk succumbing to the social and workplace stresses created by their flouting of conventional gender norms. Hence, in the interests of achieving a critical mass, the spokesperson for the network group, whose voice is heard in the prologue, is keen to downplay the potentially negative consequences of increased male involvement.

Like this spokesperson, non-critical advocates, for the most part, fail to problematise possible implications of an increased male presence. They overlook the possibility that some men may choose to work with young children with the specific intention of reinforcing prevailing gender norms (Goodman & Kelly, 1988), or that other men might claim to eschew traditional gender roles yet, paradoxically, through their practices unwittingly perpetuate and even celebrate gender stereotypes (Law, 1996; Sumsion, 2000a). Men who refer to providing a compensatory male influence in their interactions with

children or to enriching the curriculum, by incorporating interests traditionally seen as 'male' and opportunities for 'rough and tumble' play, may be blind to their own gendered assumptions (King, 1998). An experienced childcare worker in the larger, ongoing study, for example, commented:

> *I was worried, initially, that being a male in childcare, I would have to give up some of what it means to be a male – a bit loud, a bit rough – but the mums were happy to have a big guy wrestling with their kids. Not just mums with boys, but those with girls as well. They thought it was great to have the other side of the story in the childcare centre.*

His reference to gender balance – 'the other side of the story' – suggests an essentialist position that seems more likely to inhibit than contribute to gender reform (Roulston & Mills, 1998).

Yet even those men who hold, or who are developing, pro-feminist views about gender might find it difficult to resist being repositioned towards traditionally gendered roles and practices by children, parents, colleagues and employers discomfited by these men's failure to conform to traditional gender expectations (Murray, 1996; Goodman, 1987; Sumsion, 2000b). In the following excerpt, a male director of a pre-school and a participant in the ongoing research programme describes how the (female) directors of other pre-schools in his local area 'call me all the time and ask me questions. I'm like the local 'help desk' ... If they have a problem in their centre, then I can often go and fix it. Like physically fix stuff for them, rebuilding gutters and stuff like that'. For this man, who is yet to refine his awareness of gender issues, such positioning (by self and others) seems likely to reinforce rather than challenge normative gender expectations.

Similarly, non-critical advocates frequently ignore or fail to problematise the broader sociocultural political context in which potential implications of greater male participation in the early childhood sector are debated. They rarely acknowledge, for example, the 'glass escalator' effect that propels the careers of many men in traditionally female occupations to the higher echelons, even in professions like early childhood education with relatively flat career structures (Williams, 1995). Typically, this meteoric rise occurs at the expense of female colleagues (Acker, 1990; Isaacs & Poole, 1996). A 23 year-old participant in the ongoing research programme, previously an early childhood teacher and currently the coordinator of a community organisation concerned with the implementation of equity programmes, commented:

> *I'm sure that being a male was a big advantage in getting the position that I've got now, where I'm responsible for 160 workers. I'm sure that there must have been lots of applicants with much more experience than I have. I wouldn't be surprised if conversations came up [in deliberations by the interview panel] about stereotypes of men being better financial managers. You hear that sort of stereotyping all the time.*

His experience suggests that any increase in male participation might entrench males in comparatively highly paid and high-status positions within the early

childhood sector. Again, the effect would be to reinforce, rather than challenge, conventional gender expectations.

Given the dearth of empirical evidence about the gender perspectives of males who enter early childhood services, it is difficult to predict the likely impact of any increase in male involvement. Nor is it possible to gauge how representative experiences like those described in the first four verses in the prologue might be. Do disaffected men in the early childhood sector receive disproportionately extensive coverage of their concerns, as the spokesperson for the advocacy group claims in one of the verses in the prologue? Is biased reporting of men's experiences dissuading men from entering the sector, and for this reason, should less than positive accounts not be related? What strategies do men who have made a long-term commitment to early childhood education and who have established a satisfying career in the sector adopt – and are these strategies likely to contribute or to or impede gender reform? Without further investigation, we can do little but speculate about the likely impact of any increase in the male participation rate in early childhood education.

### Discourse 3: critiques of interpretive research

Investigating and representing men's experiences as early childhood educators can be problematic, especially for those accustomed to working within an interpretivist tradition. A fundamental obligation of researchers working within this tradition is to ensure that 'when the tale teller entrusts his or her tale to a receiver, the worth and dignity of the teller will be preserved' (Blumenfeld-Jones, 1995, p. 27). I allude to this moral obligation in the verse in the prologue representing my voice as researcher. The mixed responses to my attempts to publish the tale of the male early childhood teacher falsely accused of child sexual abuse have thrown into sharp relief the tensions between 'protecting and supporting the particular voices of those being researched' and our responsibilities as researchers to publicly disclose our interpretations and understandings (Smits et al, 1997, p. 204). In particular, I struggle to balance my compassion for the man who asked that his story be told and my commitment to honouring his story with my growing realisation that by failing to question his interpretation of these events, I, too, could be assisting to perpetuate gender 'stereotypical, taken-for-granted ideas and beliefs' (Barone, 1995, p. 64).

I have criticised the tendency for non-critical advocates of increased male involvement in early childhood education to ignore the broader sociocultural-political contexts. Yet, at the same time, I am conscious that 'linking individual events to larger social and historical contexts runs the risk of losing the original teller's perspective' (Blumenfeld-Jones, 1995, p. 28). In narrating this story, how do I balance a sympathetic telling of the tale with which I have been entrusted, by a man who feels deeply marginalised, while situating the narrative within in a broader context in which men, as a group, are privileged?

I welcome Barone's (1995) reminder that the aim of interpretive research 'is not to prompt a single, closed, convergent reading' (p. 66) but to allow 'readers the freedom to interpret and evaluate the text from their unique vantage points' (p. 67). He advises granting readers ample 'interpretive space' but in such a way that they are persuaded to question whose interests are revealed and served by the telling of these stories. Ultimately, he would argue, my aim as researcher should be to encourage readers to respond to the dilemmas posed by the account of the pain engendered by this male early childhood educator's experience of being falsely accused of child sexual assault.

Critics of interpretive traditions claim that 'interpretive accounts simply do not go far enough to explain the complex, historical, structural, social, economic and environmental influences upon individual experience' (Garrick, 1999, p. 151). Individuals themselves are often unaware of 'the influences and pressures that shape ... [their] attitudes and perceptions' (Garrick, 1999, p. 152). Similarly, as Sparkes (1994) explains, 'although the telling of life stories may describe the world as perceived by the people involved, it may also confine them within these perceptions' (p. 166). In undertaking to tell the story of the male teacher falsely accused of child sexual assault, therefore, am I unwittingly encouraging this man, and others who identify with him, to embrace a marginalised 'victim' perspective?

I am aware, too, that 'the opportunity to tell a story may be eagerly exploited by teachers who skillfully and unconsciously employ rhetorical devices to reconstruct an identity that will be affirmed by a sympathetic audience' (Convery, 1999, p. 134). We must be alert to the possibility, Convery urges, that 'when teachers describe significant events as "critical incidents" they are actually insulating such events from critical interrogation because they are significant for deeply personal – and therefore unchallengeable – reasons' (p. 138). When people become locked in to their stories, he contends, 'the possibilities for alternative interpretation, for reflexivity and for self-criticism are greatly reduced. Researchers of teachers' stories should be attempting to destabilize teachers' single interpretations of their experiences' (p. 140). Yet, how to do this, while upholding our obligation to honour the perspectives of those with whose interpretations we might disagree?

When negotiating these dilemmas, Smits et al (1997) remind us, we need to think about 'what purposes our research ought to serve in its dissemination' (p. 194). We must also address the fundamental questions: 'Whose side is the researcher really on? What is the researcher's agenda?' (Garrick, 1999, p. 153). The competing discourses represented in the verse beginning this article force me to reflect on these questions, my motives as a researcher and where and how I position myself in gender debates. These are issues with which I continue to wrestle as I explore the complexities, tensions and contradictions of men's involvement in early childhood education. And the more involved I become, the more I find myself drawn to feminist perspectives.

### Discourse 4: feminist perspectives

Despite the diversity of feminist perspectives, opposition to marginalising and exclusionist practices remains a fundamental principle (Coffey, 1999). Yet, some non-critical advocates of increased male participation in the early childhood workforce claim that there is feminist opposition to attempts to encourage a greater male presence and that this opposition contributes to the continuing occupational gender imbalance within the sector (see, for example, Farquhar, 1997). The verse in the prologue representing the voices of feminist reviewers and editors conceivably suggests some evidence of what non-critical advocates purport to be an 'anti-men' sentiment.

Implicit in any feminist attempts to dissuade men from pursuing a career in early childhood education would seem to be an assumption that men who are attracted to early childhood education will conform to an archetypal hegemonic masculinity and comply with traditionally gendered social scripts. By precluding the possibility that men might seek to thwart hegemonic norms, such assumptions can marginalise and exclude. As well, they fail to recognise that, by deciding on a career in early childhood, these men publicly renounce many of the privileges traditionally associated with dominant masculinities (Williams, 1992; Silin, 1995), which could suggest that they are likely to have at least a latent interest in gender reform.

Moreover, assumptions that men who are attracted to early childhood education will inevitably adopt the discourses and positionings of dominant masculinities imply an essentialist view of gender that contradicts feminist notions that gender is socially and individually constructed, not biologically determined, and fluid not fixed (Davies, 1989). Hence, there is no one masculinity, no unified male voice (Connell, 1995). Reducing masculinity 'to the status of the enemy' (Steinberg, 1999, p. ix), therefore, makes little inherent sense. Rather, as Luke (1999, p. 9) points out, there is a strong case for 'theorizing gender dynamics in positive and affirming terms, rather than focusing on 'the same old tired narratives of oppression, marginalisation, and disempower[ment]' and for exploring how men and women might work collectively to challenge existing hegemonic gender norms.

The diversity of masculinities amongst male early childhood educators and the potential of that diversity to demonstrate to children and families that gender is a continuum enabling multiple positionings was emphasised by one participant in the ongoing research programme. He described his 'failure at doing stereotyped "masculine" things' and the relief he experienced when a fellow male childcare worker 'rolled up to work on his first day in an Akubra hat and Ugh boots' (traditional Australian 'ocker' garb adopted by actor Paul Hogan). 'We were like chalk and cheese', he continued, 'So between us the kids had [access to] a much wider spectrum of masculinities and the different perspectives that came from that'. His perception of male early childhood workers collectively contributing to gender diversity by presenting a broad spectrum of gender possibilities resonates with feminist calls to explore ways of transcending the male–female binary divide (Davies, 1989; Alloway, 1995).

Additionally, his notion of a 'critical mix' of male early child educators encompassing diverse masculinities – rather than the 'critical mass' of men (proposed by non-critical advocates) or the involvement only of pro-feminist men (as proposed by many feminists) – warrants further investigation. As a potential point of intersection between seemingly oppositional discourses, it may offer a useful starting place for exploring previously overlooked possibilities for undermining gender stereotypes.

If we are to support men's efforts to undermine or transcend hegemonic gender norms, McLean (1997) argues, we need to 'develop sophisticated and empathetic understandings of men's experiences in a variety of different contexts. This means understanding the ways in which … men make sense of their world, understanding the meanings they give to their own and other people's actions, and the ways in which these meanings are informed by the dynamics of masculine culture interacting with a range of other social factors' (p. 61). More specifically, if we are to develop a deeper, more informed understanding of the potential contribution of male early childhood educators to gender reform, we must support investigations of these men, their masculinities and their perspectives on gender issues. To do so is not to condone non-critical assumptions that men in the early childhood sector are disadvantaged, marginalised or oppressed, but to acknowledge that hegemonic gender stereotypes can be problematic for both men and women. Moreover, such investigations might help early childhood workers of both sexes to refine their understandings of gender and consequently to work more effectively toward gender reform.

### Discourse 5: the 'traditional' early childhood stance

Many feminists contend that the early childhood sector has been slow to address issues of gender equity and reform (Alloway, 1995; Steinberg, 1996; Mac Naughton, 1997; Martinez, 1998). Explanations for this reticence include the tendency within the sector to conflate the traditionally feminine roles of caring and nurturing with professionalism and the privileging of developmental psychology and its hierarchical theories that reinforce existing power structures (for elaboration see, for example, Walkerdine, 1989; Alloway, 1995; Silin, 1995; Steinberg, 1996). These influences, along with an emphasis on individualism and child-centredness, have firmly positioned early childhood education within a scientific-humanist-naturalist tradition that, until recently, has remained relatively untouched by critical perspectives and social justice debates (Alloway, 1995; Martinez, 1998).

The sector's traditional lack of engagement with sociocultural-political issues and its consequent tendency to perpetuate the status quo, rather than position itself as an agent of change, is strikingly evident in the following advice from a publication for practitioners entitled *Getting Men Involved: strategies for early childhood programs* (Levine et al, 1993). 'Invite men to help out with fix-up or clean-up days', suggest the authors. 'Emphasize the fact that you

really need their brawn – and brains' (p. 38). This is an extreme example, perhaps, but one that highlights the traditional lack of critical awareness of gender issues within the sector. Consequently, as the final verse in the prologue attempts to portray, gender issues have not been rated a high priority.

An emergent critical literature about gender issues in early childhood education (e.g. Yelland, 1998), however, suggests increasing interest in 'reconceptualizing the most basic assumptions of early childhood education' and in 'deconstructing the gender context that has insidiously shaped the field' (Steinberg, 1996, p. 35). To date, these efforts have focused mainly on reconceptualising interactions between children (e.g. Danby, 1998) and between adults and children (Mac Naughton, 1997) in early childhood settings, and on deconstructing the hidden curriculum that perpetuates traditionally stereotyped sex-roles (Martin, 1998). With some noticeable exceptions (e.g. Murray, 1996), these critiques have focused exclusively on the practices of *female* early childhood educators. As such, these critics, too, could be seen to be inadvertently perpetuating gendered constructions of early childhood teachers and implicit assumptions that the early childhood sector is an inherently female domain. As well as reconceptualising our basic assumptions about *early childhood education*, therefore, it seems vital to revisit our preconceptions about *early childhood educators*.

Maintaining the momentum of this emerging critical focus on gender issues seems not only socially and morally responsible but also strategic. Given that gender identities are formed largely in the early childhood years (Davies, 1989; Alloway, 1995), the early childhood sector is ideally situated to position itself politically as a leader in gender reform. Indeed, in view of the marginalisation of early childhood education within many contemporary political agendas, and the current community, media and political focus on gender issues, such positioning would be timely.

If the early childhood sector were to contribute to gender reform, it would need to expose highly contestable and often simplistic assumptions underpinning concerns such as boys' supposed educational disadvantage (Kenway, 1995; Lingard & Douglas, 1999; Reed, 1999) and calls in the popular media for more male teachers. The sector's capacity to make a worthwhile contribution to what seems likely to become an ongoing debate would be enhanced by a more informed understanding of the gender-related perspectives and practices of male (and female) early childhood educators, the contexts in which they work, and the opportunities and constraints that sustain or impede reform.

### The Missing Discourse – children's voices

The voices of children are conspicuously absent from this 'meta-view' of the discursive landscape concerning the participation of men in early childhood education, and until we hear from children themselves, it will be difficult to

begin to gauge what, if any, difference the presence or absence of male staff actually makes for children in early childhood settings. Does the experience of being nurtured by a male teacher help to challenge young children's constructions of gender and, especially, their ubiquitous perceptions of an essential masculine/feminine dualism (Davies, 1989)? Do such experiences assist children to recognise that there are multiple masculinities, and multiple gender positionings and discourses? Does the presence of male early childhood educators help children to realise the range and fluidity of the positionings and discourses open to them as they take up their places in the different contexts of their everyday worlds (Davies, 1989)? And, if so, does this awareness help to free children from the constraints of traditional gender typecasting and expectations? Or does the presence or absence of men in early childhood settings make little real difference? Do children reject attempts by male early childhood educators to loosen gender constraints? Are the wider social forces pressing children into normative gender positionings and discourses much more influential? We need to bring the voices of children into this discussion if we are to grasp more fully the issues involved.

### Concluding Thoughts

This article has highlighted contested meanings and agendas about gender, and oppositional views about how research into gender-related issues might be undertaken and represented, who might be involved in gender reform, and what role they might play (Coffey, 1999). As the mapping of the discursive landscape concerning the involvement of men in early childhood education has shown, each of these discourses is embedded in a complex array of assumptions (Coffey, 1999). The intensity of views stemming from these assumptions and multiple discourses has masked the absence of children's voices and in many ways appears to have constrained conceptualisations of possible contributions of male early childhood educators. It seems to me that we need to create more inclusive and responsive discursive spaces than competing discourses currently permit in which to explore the potential implications of greater male involvement in early childhood education. As well as hearing more from the children themselves, a useful starting point might be to identify possible intersections between these frequently oppositional assumptions and discourses.

Take, for example, the notion of men's pain, a thread that weaves its way through most of the verses in the prologue. As Lingard (1998, p. 2) points out, there is an ongoing tension concerning an appropriate balance 'between focusing on the costs (and pain) associated with masculinity' and the advantages men enjoy as group. Stories telling of this pain, such as the narrative account that prompted this article, can be contentious, especially if they fail to slot easily into existing gender discourses (Plummer, 1995). How, and indeed whether, these stories should be told also becomes highly contested. Should they focus on the pain, for example, as those writing within

an interpretivist tradition might argue, or on the socio-political, cultural and historic contexts that contribute to and shape perceptions of the causes of that pain, as critical theorists might advocate? Or should they not be told at all?

The non-critical advocate for the men's network group referred to in the prologue argues that such stories impede efforts to attain a self-sustaining 'critical mass' of men in the early childhood sector. Similarly, some feminists argue against the telling of these stories because of their potential to fuel the 'competing victim' syndrome that attributes men's pain to inequities encountered by marginalised men rather than to hegemonic forms of masculinity that are the root cause of this pain (Lingard, 1998). Moreover, as the final verse in the prologue suggests, some see stories of male early childhood workers' pain as largely irrelevant because men constitute such a small minority group.

Creating discursive spaces in which possible intersections between these seemingly oppositional assumptions might be identified may assist in resolving some of the tensions evident in these competing stances. Such spaces might identify, for example, certain circumstances and conditions that sanction the telling of stories of men's pain, and other aspects of their experience of masculinity. Conceivably, for those who support the notion of the early childhood sector contributing proactively to gender reform, useful questions might include the following.

Does the narrative or proposed investigation focus on male early childhood educators' experiences in a way that:

(1) problematises masculinity and therefore potentially contributes to efforts to dismantle prevailing hegemonic masculinities (Mills & Lingard, 1997);
(2) assists in theorising about causes and implications of those experiences, and in doing so enhance our understanding of masculinities, and hence broader gender issues (Lingard, 1998);
(3) focuses on the construction of gender – both by young children, and those who work with young children;
(4) helps to create supportive contexts in which men and women can explore non-traditional gender options, therefore enabling children to experience a community in which adults of both sexes enact non-stereotypical and diverse gender roles;
(5) encourages others to tell their stories of their attempts to challenge prevailing gender norms so that we might learn collectively from each other;
(6) informs our understanding of the men who choose to work in the early childhood sector and 'the type of masculinity being reproduced' by them (Reed, 1999, p. 102);
(7) promotes reflection on one's assumptions, perspectives and practices and how they might perpetuate or challenge gendered expectations and constraints?

Questions such as these provide a starting point for mapping the contested meanings and assumptions about gender identified in this article. Ultimately,

however, I believe, we need to transcend the constraints of prevailing discourses if we are more fully to conceptualise the possible contributions of male early childhood educators and the implications of greater male involvement in early childhood education. I invite others, both adults and children, to join in conversations in which we might explore the possibilities.

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