

**2018 MENu Conference: Male Educators on the Fringe**

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**Report for the TRB**

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On an early Saturday morning I walked into the UniSA City West Campus a little unsure of what to expect. This was my first PD as a graduate teacher and I was excited to learn with other like-minded educators as passionate about early childhood education as me. Working as an SSO and ECW for DECD over the past nine years, I knew that males in early childhood were rare and I was interested in sharing experiences with other males who had been in similar situations as me. Little did I know just how valuable, educational and inspiring the day was going to be!

The morning started with an introduction from Dr Martyn Mills-Bayne, whose energy and passion was contagious. He started with a brief history on the advocacy of males in early childhood education, an incredibly interesting look back at how other educators had worked hard so that I can be a proud early childhood teacher today. We had a group discussion to look at the range of experiences among the educators within the room. What a diverse group we had! Collectively, the amount of years spent in early childhood education was staggering, and reaffirmed that I was in a room with incredibly experienced, passionate and talented educators.

Then it was time to start the first presentation. 'A Day in the Life of a Male Educator' was presented by Ben Jackson, who provided us the opportunity to critically self-reflect on our role as educators. He discussed what skills, dispositions and practices form a quality teacher. Upon reflection, I believe I have many of those skills and dispositions but I was able to critically think about how this impacted my practice. It required me to critically analyse how I am being the best teacher I can be. I have been very fortunate to have been surrounded and mentored by many quality teachers throughout my career and have been able to apply their teachings within my practice.

With much discussion around the importance of males in early childhood, I was pleased to hear from Ben that no-one at this conference was advocating for a 'male quota' that schools or early learning centres must uphold. Instead, we must find ways to attract quality males into the early childhood education industry. Throughout the years, I have had many people say that we need quotas to ensure there are more males or that there should be financial benefits for males. I don't believe in this as I don't believe these types of strategies attract the right male educators. It's a field that requires passion, not easy entrance or financial gain. I was particularly inspired by Ben's quote that we must be "empowered to no longer simply be the difference, but to work hard to make a difference".

Next we had Professor Lester-Irabinna Rigney present 'Value of Ethnic Diversity in the Teaching Professional: Aboriginal Australia'. For me this was an area of particular interest, as I do not feel my university degree prepared me enough to adequately support the diverse range of cultures that the children I work with represent. Professor Rigney gave many practical strategies that I am keen to add to my teaching toolkit. The one that really helped to solidify his interpretation on supporting cultures is to not try to know and understand all cultures, rather to support children and their families to bring their culture to you, other educators, and to the other children. Create a learning environment that is supportive and celebrates all cultures, and allows children to share their culture. This strategy is one I am particularly excited about taking back to my site and implementing. I know it will continue to influence my practice for many years to come.

After the official launch of AAMEC (Australian Association for Men in Early Childhood) a group which passionately advocates for high-quality educators, we moved into our third major presentation. Doctor Vaughan Cruickshake presented 'What gender-related challenges do male primary teacher face, and how do they deal with them?' While this presentation was interesting and relevant to many males at the conference, I found this one did not apply as much to me. The presentation discussed how many male educators found it difficult to find shared areas of interests with their female colleagues, making the staffroom an awkward experience. This has never been an area of concern for me and I believe my years of dance training as a child prepared me for working in a female-dominated industry. I did, however, find it interesting that nearly every male in the room felt the expectation that they are the person on staff to do all the heavy lifting. Male educators were expected to lift all heavy items, often being taken away from education time from the children to do so. Furthermore, they are also given the responsibilities of 'male roles' such as IT and discipline (in primary schools) over equally as qualified females, despite the males not wanting to do so. This was also supported by the research by Doctor Cruickshake. This is something I have found throughout my career as I am always expected to do the heavy lifting and sort out the IT despite my lack of knowledge in IT, often being taken away from the children to do so. In groups we spoke about ways we can overcome this and discussed ways we could talk to leadership about this. These conversations are important, because sometimes knowing there are others feeling the same way can provide comfort as well as our practical strategies.

I was incredibly engaged by Doctor Kate Liley, Goodstart Early Learning's National Research Manager. Her presentation allowed me to confront some bias I had towards childcares. My experience through my placements in childcares was that they basically were babysitters, not particularly interested in children's education. This is why I only wanted to work in designated preschools, without any childcare attached to the centre. However, after listening to Doctor Liley's presentation I can see that Goodstart place a high priority on education and the development of the young children they care for. It has opened my eyes to other areas of work within the early childhood sector that I can pursue in the future.

Finally we had the educator panel, consisting of five male educators from across SA in a variety of roles, including leadership. This was a great opportunity for everyone in attendance to ask questions to a diverse group of male educators. It provided rich discussion, including a heated, but respectful, debate about family/leadership rights to decide if male educators can support children in the bathroom in the same way as their equally qualified female counterparts.

Upon reflection, I have been able to share what I have learnt with my colleagues and members of the community. After learning so much vital information I made it a priority to share this information with other educators at my site and with our families. I shared my experiences at our whole site staff meeting, which includes one other male (ECW). This information was well received by the team, with many educators coming to me with follow up ideas and other starting points for rich conversations. I have already had discussions with leadership about being allocated time to do some of the 'heavy lifting work' so it does not impact my teaching time with the children. I know that conversations at this conference gave me the confidence to do this. Furthermore, I was able to have discussions with many of our families, including during our Early Intervention Program. I have been fortunate to have many families at my site who are incredibly supportive of having male educators playing a part in their child's education.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank the TRB for my sponsorship to the 2018 MEnu Conference. It was a wonderful opportunity to learn from, and network with, such inspiring educators.