

## **2018 MENu Conference - Sat 17 February**

I would open by attempting to give some context to my interest in the forum the conference provided.

I came to teaching in my late thirties and have been engaged for the last 10 years in both the primary and secondary education sectors. However during this period I experienced several occasions that made me question my decision and ability to participate in the sector due to nothing else other than gender. These incidents led me to move into the OSHC sector but I have encountered similar gender bias during the 3 years I've been working in after school care.

Ben Jackson and Molly Rhodin were especially good speakers. Together they presented many relatable anecdotes regarding parent's and the wider community's perception of, and reaction to, men in child care and education. The enduring take away from the speakers was a reminder to everyone that if anything dissatisfies you in life, "change the channel". I feel that while I may have had many reasons to abandon my one time ideal of educating children, I am determined to remain so that I might play my part in redressing the perceived ills of the industry as they pertain to males.

Hearing about the many positive effects having young children educated by males, has served to encourage my participation and guide my contribution to the wider objective. The wider objective being to accelerate the growth of males in the child care sector.

While much empirical evidence was presented to depict the under representation of males I feel the conference stopped short of offering any strategies for redressing the issue. That question remained the elephant in the room throughout the conference.

In fact before I attended the conference I made an effort to read some recent research on the area. Some of these sources are listed below.

I found that almost all the academic discourse highlighted the state of gender imbalance in the industry and extolled the benefits of having increased male participation but had very little discussion of solutions.

Given that diversity has become a primary KPI in corporate and business circles over the last decade, it is puzzling why early childhood education appears to be the one industry immune from diversity's reach. As a society we have witnessed a seismic shift in gender equality in policing, nursing, armed forces, medicine and other industries once seen as a male domain. I was intrigued to learn that Denmark boasted 25% male participation in early childhood. However, I then remembered that I was once told that Denmark and other northern European countries revere teachers in society to the point that parents are more likely to boast of their son the teacher than their son the Doctor or Lawyer. In Australia I believe the opposite is true.

The conference forum afforded me a better understanding of why men are under-represented in childcare but short of affirmative action policies, no real solutions appear to be on the policy and planning table of regulatory bodies. I have long been an opponent of affirmative action policies to redress an under representation in society and opt instead for merit based systems.

However, the merits of males in early childcare, while recognised are still ignored or perhaps pushed aside by more pressing concerns among those that make hiring decisions.

I have heard so many examples relayed to me by female directors and primary school principals that if given two equally qualified educators they would always choose the female because it is seen as 'low risk'. I believe it is this cultural perception of why female educators are seen as low risk that is the real issue. Cultural bias is something that is extremely difficult to alter, even with the assistance of legislation or policy. This discussion goes to the core of the problem. Issues of poor salary or career progression opportunities are secondary.

In my workplace I am the only male. I am director of a small OSHC service run by a very large provider. There are numerous operational advantages to having a male and female educator work together and the curriculum is definitely aided by a male's input and delivery. However, these facts are still insignificant in the eyes of HR who are more mindful of the "risk" associated with employing males. This risk aversion of course cannot be documented as it would run foul of anti-discrimination laws but sadly it remains strong in practice. Ironically the misconception of males as 'high risk' is only strengthened by such management practices. Industry leaders need to recognise that employing males can be seen as a bold, progressive badge of honour rather than a liability.

I applaud Dr. Martyn Mills-Bayne for his field of research and hope that he and like-minded colleagues might positively inform decision makers so that some 'real' tangible progress can be made in this space. From my point of view I can only hope that my professional practice and enthusiasm as a male educator goes some way in encouraging a male to pursue the career, a female director want to seek out a male educator and a family want to enrol their child in a service *because* they have male educators.

For my part I shall continue to support my nephew and others to pursue teaching. I will continue to create an educative environment that invites consideration from parent's that our child will be exposed to positive male role models and interactions.

#### Interesting Reading:

- **New Zealand men's participation in early years work** , Sarah-Eve Farquhar
- Pages 733-744, Published online: 27 Sep 2008
  
- **Under-representation of males in the early years: *The challenges leaders face***
- Malini Mistry, Krishan Sood. First Published April 4, 2013