The Male Voice: Has there been a shift in thinking and practice in relation to men working in the early years?

Last year Chris Deller and Stephen Peeling gained Early Years Teacher Status (EYTS) through the Graduate Employment Based route at the University of Chichester. Both are in their late twenties and like other men working in early years this was not their original career choice (Owen, 2003; Rolfe 2005). In fact both men gained degrees in Music related subjects and worked in this field during their early twenties; one as a disc jockey and the other as a guitarist in a band. A desire and drive of both participants to do something that made a wider difference within the community and society generally together with the influence of family members, working as teaching and non-teaching staff in schools, led them to work in the primary sector. Both found the pressure and expectations on staff and children in primary schools to be against their values and beliefs but from this experience found themselves working in nurseries through chance meetings and opportunities.

The following questions were posed to Stephen and Chris and their responses provide a unique insight into the lives and perceptions of two men working in this female dominant sector.

1. Do you believe it is important to have men working in early years or that it doesn’t matter?

**Chris:** I strongly believe that it is important for men to be working alongside women throughout all educational sectors. For me, I feel that schools should be reflections of an ideal society and modelling to children how society should work which is reflected by the working relationships between adults. When children see men in the education sector working together with women and treating them equally, I feel that this actively challenges gender stereotypes and provides children with an opportunity to see similarities in men and women instead of gaining the view that they are different or should be segregated.

**Stephen:** I believe it is very important for two reasons. Firstly, the key person/child relationship may be the child’s first extended relationship with anyone outside of their immediate family. It is therefore important that the child is given the opportunity to cultivate that relationship with an adult of either gender. If that environment is exclusively female then the child is beginning their development with a biased perspective on gender roles in society. The danger here is that we are setting up children to enter society with an ingrained belief that women are the care givers and men are more distant and not naturally able to nurture young people and provide care. Seemingly innate prejudices in our society regarding gender roles could be more easily broken down if our children didn’t begin their interaction with society in an environment that supports and perpetuates such outdated stereotypes.

Secondly, I believe that as a sector we need to gain proper recognition of our value and importance from society in general. A shift in people’s perspective of what we actually do and how vital it is to children’s development is the only way to secure the level of funding and support needed to achieve the best results for our children. I don’t think it’s realistic to achieve this through simply ‘upskilling’ the sector with the gender imbalance as it is. The sector’s workforce must represent the demographics of all society in order for society to truly empathise. More men working in early years would help to dispel prejudices about the sector and allow us to progress professionally.

1. Do you feel colleagues and parents value having a male in the setting or not?

**Chris:** I feel that the majority of colleagues and parents do value male presence in the setting. Before I gained EYTS, pretty much every experience I had with parents and colleague directly spoke about their enthusiasm of seeing men working in the early years sector and at times specifically chose the setting for this reason. I have also had colleagues discuss this, saying “having men working helps to stop the bitchiness of working in all women environment”.

Since then however, I have met a minority of parents and colleagues who have expressed a difference of opinion, specifically on the subject of changing nappies where parents and some colleagues have been uncomfortable with the idea of men changing children. Being met with that experience can be hurtful, as meeting the care needs of children is an essential part of working with young children and to be treated with suspicion or have assumptions made about you purely based on gender has led to a loss of confidence and a feeling that my presence alone is doing more harm than good.

**Stephen:** I’ve felt some resistance from colleagues in past settings. I’ve felt that a small minority of colleagues can rush to make a snap judgement on my actions or contributions based on the fact that I’m a man. At points that has been unhelpful. However, on the whole, I’ve found that my colleagues have welcomed me into settings as a man. I’ve been told many times by my colleagues and parents that it is refreshing to see a man working in early years.

1. Do you think you have you are ever been asked to carry out certain roles because you are a man?

**Chris:** Most certainly! I have on occasion been asked to come off of the nursery floor to assist in building maintenance or moving furniture without anyone else being sought out to ask. Presumably this is because I have been identified as a man and therefore it has been assumed that I would be best to assist with the task. I've always been asked to help out with ICT issues, however this may be because they've learnt I work with computers as a hobby instead of a gender stereotypes link.

**Stephen:** I have been asked to work with older boys and physical activities more often than my female colleagues, and less often with babies. This could though, simply be down to my own skill set at the time when this occurred. Since I’ve become more experienced I would say that I generally experience the same day to day workload as anyone else. I don’t think I have been denied any specific opportunity due to my gender.

1. Were you aware that research in the past (King, 2004) has suggested that men in early years are construed as being potential paedophiles?

**Chris:** Whilst I have been aware of it in the past, it is only recently that I have been asked by female staff if I feel “I have to be careful” being a man in the Early Years sector. I respond that actively challenging the stereotypes of men working in the Early Years sector actually can help to reduce the effects of abuse, especially for children whose experience of men may only be abusive. I do feel that this stereotype is waning with the gradual increase in men working in the sector.

**Stephen:** Before making the switch to working in early years, I was aware of a vague general level of discrimination and bigotry. However, at that time I wasn’t aware it was as prevalent in some people’s minds it appears to be. A former boss of mine felt the need to check with the parents involved in the setting before employing me. The parent’s response was overwhelmingly positive, but the fact the question had to be asked indicates a wider problem. I feel this particularly cruel perception comes largely from people outside the sector. In my experience, those who know the sector and the work that we do, don’t tend to see anything unusual about a man working in early years and are therefore not suspicious or bigoted.

I’ve had no first-hand experience of discrimination, but I felt particularly offended and outraged by Conservative MP Andrea Leadsom comments during the 2016 leadership contest, “Let’s face it, most of us don’t employ men as nannies, most of us don’t. Now you can call that sexist, I call that cautious and very sensible when you look at the stats. Your odds are stacked against you if you employ a man. We know paedophiles are attracted to working with children. I’m sorry but they’re the facts.” The statement, from a high profile MP, was really disheartening but hopefully most people are more enlightened.

1. Some have discussed suggestions “that working in the early years challenges men’s sexuality” (Brownhill et al, 2016, p.31).

**Chris:** This is something that I've never been made aware of or ever had any first-hand experience of. I think this assumption ties into a traditional stereotype that only women want and should care for children, whilst men are interested in providing financially or simply not interested at all and therefore any man working in the early years is effeminate, following another stereotype that all gay men are effeminate. To suggest that straight men lack the ability emotional literacy does nothing but excuse men that follow outdated ideals of masculinity.

**Stephen:** I think it’s all related to an outdated idea of what masculinity really means. I find it offensive as it makes ludicrous generalisations about gay people and limits people of a certain sexual orientation to a set of characteristic stereotypes. I’ve never had any first-hand experience of this but I’m aware of the perception.

1. How have you been treated by your female co-workers during your time in early years?

**Chris:** I think in comparison to how some female co-workers work with each other, my presence leads to female workers treating me more professionally. Whilst some perceived negatives might be not being invited to social gatherings or having discussions suddenly stop when entering the room for me this does not matter. The positives of having my opinion sought when sharing ideas and discussing new strategies and being complimented that a male presence has led to a calmer working environment is valuable.

**Stephen:** I’ve become aware of a general tendency for some of my female co-workers to see me as somehow more professional and less human and caring. Some women have unnecessarily deferred to my opinion over their own when an ‘educational’ decision has to be made. This may be down to my level of qualification, my gender or simply the level of confidence of the individual woman in each case. At other times during a work day I find that some female co-workers assume I will be less capable in matters that require emotional sensitivity or even things like personal care routines. Obviously both assumptions aren’t conducive to a healthy and equal working environment but are not typical and occur rarely.

1. Did/ do you feel comfortable in this female dominated sector?

**Chris:** Personally yes; a big personal responsibility I feel is for me is to show children that men and women can work collaboratively and positively. To work in a female dominated sector allows me to consistently demonstrate this to a wide variety of people.

**Stephen:** I feel completely comfortable. However, for reasons I’ve previously mentioned, I would like the sector to be more equal.