

Research For Learning: ECEY5010

Research Topic Title:

"Exploring the Experiences of Men Working in Early Years Across Wales: A Qualitative Study"

Portfolio Contents:

Student AI Declaration (page 2)

Section 1: Literature Review (pages 3 - 6)

Section 2: Methodological Considerations (pages 7 - 13)

Section 3: Ethical Considerations (pages 14 – 18)

Section 4: Reference List (pages 19 - 24)

AI Declaration -

I acknowledge the use of Google Scholar [<https://scholar.google.com/>] between period:

01/04/2025 - 30/05/2025 to help search for relevant academic journals and literature which are not always available via the university online library.

1. Prompts in relation to men in Early Years education were used
2. Prompts in relation to qualitative research methodology were used
3. Prompts in relation to ethical research considerations were used

I confirm that I have not presented any AI generated text as my own work. I confirm I have copies of my drafts, notes, and other resources I used before, and after the use of AI tools which I may be asked to provide in evidence.

Section 1: Literature Review

Introduction

The underrepresentation of men in the Early Years workforce has been widely acknowledged as a longstanding issue in both policy and academic literature. For example, the Welsh Government's 'Childcare, Play, and Early Years Workforce Plan', introduced in 2017, aims to encourage a more diverse workforce, and highlights the need to increase the number of males working in Early Years settings (Welsh Government, 2017). The strategy explains that male practitioners can serve as role models for children and help foster future interest among males in pursuing careers in Early Years education.

To support this, the Welsh Government has partnered with Social Care Wales to deliver initiatives under the WeCare Wales attraction and recruitment framework. These include using case studies and expert speakers from underrepresented groups to showcase the sector and attract a more diverse range of candidates (Welsh Government, 2024a). Recent workforce mapping highlights the scale of gender imbalance. According to a Welsh Government report, 71% of early years settings reported having no male staff at all, while only 1% had no female staff (Welsh Government, 2024b).

This disparity is not unique to Wales; in England, men make up just 3% of the Early Years' workforce (UK Government Department for Education, 2019), and within Europe, the highest proportion of males is found in Norway, with only 9% (Rohrmann et al., 2021). International research by McDonald et al. demonstrates how the lack of males is a global concern, describing the early childhood education and care sector as "one of the most highly sex- segregated sectors globally." (McDonald et al., 2024, p.510).

The following literature review aims to critically assess recent and relevant published academic research on the subject of male professionals in early childhood education, outlining the extent of current knowledge and identifying potential gaps which could be addressed by future research.

Perspectives on the Role and Value of Male Practitioners

A growing body of literature shows the value of male professionals in early childhood education. Historically, theorists have focused on how males can act as visible role models of masculinity for children, especially boys, whose gender identities develop in relationship with others through social learning and imitation (Bandura et al., 1961). More specifically, male role models might be especially important for boys who do not see themselves represented in the wider community. For example, Bryan and Milton Williams (2017) have discussed the importance of culturally relevant male role models and how they can support improved academic outcomes, focusing on Black males in particular.

More recent research, however, challenges ideas about male role models, arguing that they often rely on assumptions about gender differences, for example, that males are less nurturing caregivers than females (Warin, 2018). Wilkinson et al. (2024) have shown that the few men who do work in Early Years will undertake the same tasks interchangeably with females, except for changing nappies. Their study involved conducting interviews with fifteen people working at different levels in Early Years settings, some of whom were male practitioners themselves. They found key concerns relating to the role of men in intimate care, including a lack of trust, and parents not wanting a male to change nappies for religious reasons. This created tensions that participants found hard to manage.

Barriers, Stereotypes and Structural Challenges

Negative stereotypes about males have also been uncovered in research investigating the gender-specific beliefs of fifty male and female newly qualified or soon-to-qualify Early Years teachers in Sweden (Hedlin et al., 2019). Researchers found that the males who took part experienced being understood by others as either “the fun guy” or “the possible perpetrator” (Hedlin et al., 2019, p.101), which put pressure on them to resist these positions in the workplace. Moosa and Bhana (2022) also found that ideas of paedophilia arose during research into the role of male teachers in early childhood education undertaken in the global south. Focusing on South African male perspectives, they also

noted stereotypes about sexuality, with gay males being seen as more appropriate for Early Years settings because they are seen to be more feminine.

Ljunggren and Eidevald (2023) interviewed nine male educators from Iceland, Norway, and Sweden, using a narrative approach which asked men to reflect on their careers in early childhood education. They found that many men were influenced by social expectations relating to gender and class when entering or leaving a female-dominated profession. Participants discussed how their roles involved challenging fixed ideas of masculinity but also gave opportunities for them to experience and share a wider range of embodied and playful experiences with children. These are ideas echoed in recent research in the United States (Shapiro et al., 2021).

Drawing on survey and interview data from men in UK Early Years settings, Jones and Aubrey (2019), found that many males viewed themselves as bringing different perspectives to behaviour management and emotional support. However, the authors also caution against making assumptions about gender, noting the diversity of teaching styles across both male and female educators. Their research also showed how institutional barriers play a role in the lack of male educators, identifying a lack of targeted Early Years recruitment strategies and limited career progression routes for men. While their study provides relevant sector-specific insight, it lacks ethnic and regional diversity, which research has shown to be an important factor. For example, Bhana et al (2022) highlight how race, class, and gender intersect, affecting both men's access to and experiences of the profession.

Gaps in Research and Conclusion

One limitation of studies to date in this area is that they often use small numbers of participants from specific settings. Whilst suitable for qualitative approaches, which prioritise depth over quantity (Flick, 2018), this makes it hard to generalise their findings to other contexts. However, the studies do highlight common experiences, attitudes, and barriers to increasing diversity in the Early Years' workforce in relation to gender. Many studies note the lack of strategies to address this problem (e.g.,

Jones and Aubrey, 2019). Wilkinson and Warin (2022), investigated men-only support groups for Early Years educators, finding that men valued spaces to share experiences without judgment. This suggests that more research into how to support men in their careers could help policy makers develop more effective strategies for different contexts. In particular, research that looks at different kinds of diversity alongside gender (such as race, class, and disability) has been noted as a key gap to be addressed in future research (Heinz et al., 2023).

Importantly, there is a clear gap in recent research which considers these factors of male experiences in the Welsh Early Years' context. Addressing this gap could help existing efforts to recruit and retain males in the Early Years' workforce. Section Two will outline a prospective research project in this area.

Section 2: Methodological Considerations

(A) Research Aims:

Following the literature review, it is evident that men are underrepresented in Early Years education globally, with factors such as gender stereotypes and institutional barriers playing a part. Despite current policy initiatives, there is a gap in recent published research that focuses on the experiences of male teachers currently working in Early Years classes within mainstream primary schools in Wales. As a result, this prospective research study outlines suitable methodology for exploring the following:

- Male teachers' motivations working in the Early Years sector
- Males' perceptions of their roles, particularly in relation to gender stereotypes and other types of diversity

(B) Research Approach:

Quantitative methods require the gathering of large amounts of data, which are usually numerical or statistical, and can help researchers identify broader patterns and objective trends (Efron and Ravid, 2020). The aims of this study, on the other hand, suit a qualitative approach, as qualitative methods are focused on in-depth exploration of participants' subjective experiences, responses, feelings, and attitudes (Kumar, 2014).

Data Collection Method:

This study will use semi-structured online focus groups to collect data. The rationale for this is that focus groups are particularly well-suited for exploring both the similarities and differences that may exist within a group through dialogue (Fielding et al., 2017). While individual interviews offer privacy and depth (Mears, 2021), they lack the benefits of group interaction. For example, group settings can encourage people to think about their experiences in relation to other perspectives they may not have previously considered, giving a greater depth of reflection than individual narratives (Bell et al., 2024). Focus groups have also been shown to have the potential to reduce feelings of isolation amongst participants (Gibbs, 2021), which research has shown to be a challenge for this group.

On a practical level, offering a live online focus group could make it easier for people in a busy profession from different geographical regions to participate, however, this relies on the computer literacy of the participants and their availability (Lobe, 2017). A recent systematic review also found that participants engaged in more discussion and generated more data in face-to-face focus groups compared to online formats (Chai et al., 2024). This illustrates the importance of organising and preparing to facilitate online groups as effectively as possible (Fielding et al., 2017).

Focus Group Format and Facilitation

Focus group formats may be more highly structured, or less structured/unstructured. The highly structured format is usually more suited to larger studies and only allows short responses with limited flexibility for individual perspectives. A totally unstructured approach, although more flexible, could lead to unfocused discussion and possibly hinder the comparability of data (Mukherji and Albon, 2018). Considering the aims of this research, the focus groups will be semi-structured, meaning participants will be guided by a facilitation plan of pre-prepared, broad questions, with prompting and probing questions being used by the researcher(s) to help guide discussions where needed. This semi-structured approach allows for flexibility for different responses and spontaneous discussion, whilst retaining focus on the aims of the research (Gibbs, 2021).

Example questions may include:

1. What motivates you to work in an Early Years setting?

Potential prompts/probes:

- a. How did you start working with Early Years?
- b. Did you have a preference for Early Years / were you allocated / what is your age group preference, if any?

2. What role does being male play in how you experience your work?

Potential prompts/probes:

- a. Does being male change how you do your job?

- b. Does it affect your relationship with others and how they see you, e.g. children, parents, other staff?
- c. Are there other parts of your identity that you think are important as well as gender?

3. Are there benefits that being male brings to your role?

Potential prompts/probes:

- a. Are there benefits in terms of how you teach?
- b. Do you think the children benefit? What about staff and the wider organisation?

4. What supports or barriers have they encountered as a male teacher?

Potential prompts/probes:

- a. Are there any personal barriers? Organisational barriers?
- b. Do you feel there is enough support for you as a male teacher?
- c. How do you feel about your career progression and future in teaching?

5. Anything else?

As well as challenges in retaining focus, online focus groups can present difficulties around groups and conflict, different levels of participation, non-participation, and can create data that is difficult to analyse (Cohen et al., 2018). Skillful facilitation will include setting a clear agenda, giving opportunity for everyone to speak, and maintaining a respectful atmosphere (Winwood, 2019), as well as other ethical practices considered in Section Three below. Having a second facilitator present will be advantageous in managing potential challenges relating to the practical organisation of the focus groups, such as technology support (Fielding et al., 2017), also bringing different perspectives and interpretations to the group and any later analysis.

(C) Participants and Recruitment:

Participants

The study aims to recruit 8–12 participants, which is appropriate for conducting one or two focus groups, depending on levels of interest in taking part. This number aligns with guidance that focus groups typically work best with 6-8 participants, as a group of this size is expected to generate a variety of perspectives while still ensuring that all participants have adequate opportunity to contribute (Morgan, 2018). Smaller groups can also help create a more open and comfortable environment, particularly when discussing sensitive or personal topics such as gender identity and workplace experiences in early childhood settings. In qualitative research, smaller sample sizes such as this are often sufficient to reach the point at which no new insights or themes are emerging, which is termed 'saturation' (Flick, 2018).

To be eligible to take part in the study, participants must be currently working as a mainstream primary school teacher of an Early Years class (i.e. nursery, reception and/or year 1), and be based in Wales. As the focus of the research is on gendered experiences in a female-dominated profession, the study will include participants who identify as male, including cisgender and trans men. It will also include those who may identify in other ways (for example, as non-binary or gender-fluid) but are perceived by others, or present themselves, as male in their role. This reflects an understanding of gender as both self-defined and socially interpreted (Warin, 2018).

Efforts will be made to recruit a diverse range of participants. This includes regional variation, ensuring participation from both North and South Wales as well as a balance of urban and rural areas. Participants will be recruited across career stages, from newly qualified practitioners to those with extensive experience, to enable comparison of perspectives at different points in their professional journey. Cultural and linguistic diversity will also be considered, including whether participants work in Welsh-medium settings, given the significant role of language and national identity in educational policy and practice in Wales (Welsh Government, 2024c). Finally, attention will be paid to ethnic and religious diversity, recognising that experiences of gender in early childhood education may intersect with other aspects of identity, such as race, culture, and faith.

Recruitment

Participants will be recruited through a range of channels, as this has been noted as important for encouraging broad participation from a diverse range of people (Negrin et al. 2022). For example, a recruitment strategy will include establishing contacts with local authorities, Early Years organisations, and educational networks to help identify and contact potential participants. Recruitment materials, such as flyers and digital posters, will be shared through professional forums and social media platforms relevant to the Early Years sector, including Facebook groups, Twitter/X, and LinkedIn. All recruitment materials will clearly explain the purpose of the research, eligibility criteria, and how data will be used (in line with ethical considerations). A small thank-you voucher will be offered to participants in recognition of their time and contributions, which may help encourage participation and acknowledge the value of their input (Gibbs, 2021).

One potential limitation of the recruitment strategy is the risk of self-selection bias, whereby individuals with particularly strong or emotionally charged experiences may be more motivated to volunteer (Kumar, 2014). This could result in a skewed sample that over-represents certain viewpoints and underrepresents others. To minimise this risk, recruitment materials will be carefully worded to avoid emotive or leading language. Another challenge may arise from gatekeeping, particularly in settings where male practitioners are few in number. In some cases, senior staff may unintentionally or deliberately fail to pass on study information to eligible staff. For this reason, the study will use multiple recruitment routes to provide practitioners with different ways to access the opportunity to participate independently of their institutions.

(D) Analysing the data:

Focus group sessions will be recorded and transcribed verbatim. Transcripts will be anonymised to protect participants' identities. Data will then be analysed using thematic analysis, following the process outlined by Braun and Clarke (2017). This approach has been chosen because it supports the identification of both surface-level content and deeper meanings arising from participants' experiences. Thematic analysis follows six stages: familiarisation with the data, generating initial

codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report (Flick, 2018).

The study will also consider other potential biases and how to manage them. The Hawthorne effect, where participants modify their behaviour because they know they are being observed, may influence responses in the focus groups (Festinger and Katz, 1953). This will be addressed by creating a relaxed, conversational atmosphere and emphasising the importance of honesty and a range of perspectives. The halo effect is also relevant, which is where participants may present overly positive or idealised accounts of their experiences (Cohen et al., 2018). Facilitators will focus on creating an open discussion where it is clear there is no pressure to give a positive account.

Triangulation enhances the trustworthiness of qualitative research by using multiple perspectives to cross-check findings (Coe, 2021). In this study, triangulation of different kinds of methods is limited as only focus groups will be used, but there will be triangulation in the analysis process which will be undertaken by at least two researchers. Additionally, data triangulation is supported by including participants from diverse regions of Wales, helping to capture a broader range of experiences which can improve the depth and credibility of the analysis (Mukherji and Albon, 2018).

Researcher bias is also important to take into account, as this can have an impact across the research process, shaping the kinds of questions asked and the way data is interpreted. (Jamieson et al., 2023) describe how the practice of reflexivity can help researchers to examine the kinds of assumptions and beliefs they bring to their work, giving practical tools and prompts that will be used alongside discussions with other researchers involved.

(E) Conclusion:

This methodology sets out a clear plan for exploring the experiences of male teachers working in Early Years education in Wales. A qualitative approach using semi-structured online focus groups has been chosen to encourage dialogue and shared reflection, while allowing space for individual differences. Thematic analysis will enable in-depth interpretation of the data and careful attention has been given to participant diversity, the challenges of online facilitation, and potential biases such as

the Hawthorne and halo effects. While the scale of the study is small, its design aims to generate valid and useful insights into how gender is experienced in a predominantly female profession.

Section 3: Ethical Considerations

Ethical Principles and Institutional Approval

Ethical research is grounded in principles of respect for persons, beneficence, and justice, which are reflected in widely accepted codes such as the British Educational Research Association (BERA) Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research (BERA, 2024). These principles help ensure that research is designed and conducted in ways that minimise harm, promote fairness, and uphold the highest standards of research. As this study explores the views of males working in Early Years education in Wales, which may bring up sensitive experiences and emotive subjects, it was especially important to plan for ethical challenges across all phases of the research process.

Adhering to ethical guidelines also ensures the credibility and trustworthiness of research. Ethical transparency enhances and protects the legitimacy of both the university and the wider academic community (Brooks et al., 2014). By submitting this project for formal ethical approval from the relevant university ethics committee before data collection begins, the researcher commits to accountability, continuous ethical reflection, and fidelity to the principles of respectful, inclusive research.

Informed Consent

Securing informed consent is one of the most fundamental ethical requirements in research involving human participants. It ensures that individuals voluntarily agree to participate based on an understanding of what the research involves, and without coercion or pressure (Miller et al., 2012). Informed consent, according to BERA, is an ongoing process rather than a one-off administrative task. It requires clear communication, time for questions, and respect for the participant's capacity to make an informed decision throughout the research process (BERA, 2024).

For this study, each participant will receive an information sheet detailing the purpose of the study, its procedures, potential risks and benefits, and how their data will be used. The sheet will also explain participants' rights, including the right to withdraw at any point without penalty. Consent will be recorded via signed forms and verbally confirmed before the focus groups begin.

Consent will not be treated as a one-off procedure but as a continuous process, as recommended by Taquette *et al.* (2022) in a recent literature review of ethical dilemmas in qualitative research. Participants will be reminded of their rights during and after the focus groups and encouraged to raise questions or concerns at any point. Particular care will be taken to avoid any sense of pressure to participate, and recruitment materials will clearly state that participation is voluntary and that choosing not to take part will have no negative consequences. Should a participant withdraw, every effort will be made to remove their data from the research record unless the data has already been anonymised or published in a way that makes removal infeasible. This ensures that their autonomy continues to be respected even after data collection has taken place.

Confidentiality and Anonymity

Protecting the confidentiality and anonymity of participants is a vital part of ethical research (Winwood, 2019). However, this can be challenging in qualitative research with small, specific populations. For example, male teachers working in Early Years education in Wales are a relatively small group, and some participants may know each other through professional networks.

To manage this, the study will use best practices for anonymising data during transcription, analysis, and writing up the results (Bos, 2020). Pseudonyms will be used in all transcripts and reports. Identifiable information such as job titles, place names, or any other specific contextual information will be removed. Participants will be advised during the consent process that, while every effort will be made to protect their identity, full anonymity cannot be guaranteed in a group setting. This will help ensure they are making a fully informed decision to take part.

During the focus groups, participants will be asked to agree to a group confidentiality agreement. This will include a shared commitment to keep information discussed private, treat each other with respect, and avoid disclosing the identities or views of others outside the session. While this cannot fully prevent breaches of confidentiality, setting clear expectations and modelling respectful behaviour when facilitating the focus group can reduce the risk (Sim and Waterfield, 2019).

Risks and Minimising Harm

Researchers have an obligation to prevent harm arising during their work (Cohen et al., 2018). Talking about gender, identity, and professional experiences can bring up sensitive or difficult emotions, for example in relation to experiences of discrimination or marginalisation which can be a more prevalent difficulty for men (Chandler, 2022). As well as careful facilitation, ethical planning will involve being prepared to support participants if they become distressed or experience discomfort. A protocol will be in place in case a participant becomes upset. This can involve pausing or stopping the focus group if needed, offering to continue discussion at another time, and providing information about support services. As mentioned, participants will also be reminded that they can withdraw at any time.

Focus groups will be facilitated with care, following the guidance described in the methodology section, including setting clear expectations, promoting respectful dialogue, and providing space for different perspectives. The presence of a second researcher can help manage group dynamics and provide additional support if required. The facilitators will be attentive to group dynamics that could affect participation. For example, participants may differ in status or confidence, and some may

dominate the discussion. Techniques such as turn-taking, checking in with quieter participants, and use of breakout rooms (if needed) will help manage this (Sim and Waterfield, 2019).

In addition, the researcher acknowledges that ethical risks are not only limited to participants (Hammersley, 2021). Researchers themselves may also experience emotional strain when working with sensitive data or hearing distressing experiences (Smillie and Riddell, 2023). To help manage this, the lead researcher will engage in supervision and reflective practice throughout the study.

The study also recognises the risk that findings may be manipulated, misinterpreted, or misused after publication (Bos, 2020). For example, selectively quoted experiences could be used to reinforce bias against male practitioners or Early Years settings more broadly, making it important for reporting to present a balanced picture, drawing on a range of voices and clearly stating the limitations of the study.

As part of ethical research, participants should have a clear, accessible route to raise concerns or lodge complaints should they arise (Bos, 2020). The participant information sheet will include contact details for both the lead researcher and the university research ethics committee. This ensures that participants are not reliant solely on the researcher to mediate ethical concerns. Embedding formal mechanisms for accountability protects participants, enhances trust, and reinforces the researcher's commitment to ethical transparency. It also protects the university, the profession, and the broader research community from reputational risk arising from ethical breaches (Brooks and Maguire, 2014).

Data Management and Protection

Ethical research requires research to collect and store data securely, ensuring participants know their rights, and being clear about how long data will be kept and how it will be used (Cohen et al., 2018). All data will be handled in line with GDPR (General data protection regulation) and the Data Protection Act 2018 (UK Government, 2018). Audio recordings of focus groups will be stored on encrypted university systems and password protected. These recordings will be transcribed either by the researcher or a professional transcription service that has signed a confidentiality agreement. Once transcription is complete and accuracy has been checked, audio recordings will be deleted.

Anonymised data will be stored in accordance with institutional policy and then securely destroyed. Participants will be informed of this during the consent process. If a participant withdraws from the study, their data will be deleted unless this would affect the anonymity of others or the validity of the findings. If findings are published, direct quotes may be used to illustrate themes. These will be carefully anonymised, and participants will be informed of this possibility when giving consent.

Conclusion

Upholding ethical standards is central to creating a research environment that is just, respectful, and attentive to the risks and vulnerability of participants, researchers, and the wider academic community. The focus of this study brings specific ethical considerations which require careful attention. Through transparent procedures, careful facilitation, and a commitment to participant wellbeing, the research aims to uphold the highest standards of research integrity by embedding ethical principles such as consent, confidentiality, risk, and data management, and by securing full institutional ethics approval.

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