

Why is there a shortage of male early childhood educators? ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Missing in action: Male educators on the fringe

Male educators working in the early childhood sector are finally getting their own national association. February 17 will see the official launch of the Australian Association for Men in Early Childhood (AAMEC) in Adelaide at the one-day MENu 2018 Male Educators on the Fringe conference. The keynote speaker of the annual conference is Ben Jackson, the founder of MANscaping, the male educator social platform. He also took out this year's (2017) Australian Family Early Education & Care Rising Star award.

Two in 100 educators are male

Conference organiser, Dr Martyn Mills-Bayne, who lectures in early childhood education at the University of South Australia, says that male early childhood educators account for less than 2% of the sector.

"In many other fields of employment where similarly low diversity figures exist, there have been strategic and concerted efforts made to try and bring some balance to the workforce.

"In the field of early education and care, however, there are a number of societal factors that impact male involvement and a simple quota or scholarship scheme is not the answer."

Why it matters

So, why is it a big deal we're not seeing many men on the 'floor' in our sector?

"The main reason is it's about modelling positive adult interactions so males should be there as a model for children who may not have positive male role models in their lives or through their educational experiences. It's also about rich positive interactions between male and female educators, models of how adults interact," says Marty.

He also crystallizes three key arguments on why there's a shortage of men in the sector. They include:

- It's women's work and men are not 'designed to work with young children' as it's not a male space.
- The breadwinner argument meaning men can't afford to earn as little as the sector pays.
- Men are viewed as predators so people should be suspicious of male educators.
- "It's a huge risk a man going into that career and having his career ended by accusations or innuendos that aren't true. All these things need to be changed at a broad societal level."

And this is where it gets interesting.

Beware male stereotypes

Marty says male educators would break gender stereotypes by entering the early childhood education sector.

"The pressure to break the stereotype and do what's considered traditionally less masculine – that may be the reason they go into the sector. Sometimes female educators will say to a male educator, we need someone to do rough and tumble with the boys, change a light bulb or play with construction toys. I've often said, 'I'm not the guy who's going to fix things. I don't have the skills. I'm going to sing and dance, do socio-dramatic stuff as that's what I am good at'."

A non-standard path

Marty's path to becoming an early childhood education expert began as a printer's apprentice straight out of school, and then he spent seven years as a disability education and recreation worker.

"I found my way into education through my own children. When they were very young, it seemed natural to me to play with and teach them. That flowed onto friend's children and it was my wife suggesting I consider this as a university study pathway and career even though I

hadn't finished high school, and that led to this path," he said.

He enrolled in a bachelor's degree in early childhood, did relief work in primary schools and early education OHSC services before graduating with honours and teaching in a reception classroom at a primary school.

"I went into the sector a bit naively; not thinking of any of the concerns or challenges men might have in early childhood. I just thought this is a space I'd like to work in. I liked getting down on the floor with them and connecting with them using play-based learning," he says. It helps too, that Marty doesn't have mates who'd "pay me out because I work in early childhood education."

After graduating he went onto postgraduate research, then successfully applied for a PhD scholarship, a turning point, which meant he forged a career as a lecturer.

Working with children is impactful

"It still hurts not teaching in schools. Working with children enriched my soul while the tertiary sector enriches my brain. I really miss seeing the change in children's lives. It can be so dramatic and impactful."

Meanwhile, at the university where he teaches, he noticed the attrition rate for men studying early childhood was high. On average each year five men would enroll in the undergraduate degree. However, by the end of the course, only a couple would graduate.

"The uni employed me to research why that is and what we can do about it," he says.

MENtor, an Australian first

He recommended developing a professional social network for male students and got the go-ahead to set up the MENtor Program for Males in Early Childhood Education there in 2011. His role is to support, counsel, guide and connect male students to others who are further into their journey. Marty manages a closed Facebook page that has 250-plus educators. The group also has networking events in Adelaide. He's helped about 50 students face-to-face, and won a citation from his university for outstanding contribution to student learning.

However, he balks at saying increased enrollments are due to him, pointing instead to an increase in male international students doing their masters' degree in early childhood teaching. Males account for about 6% of early education students at the University of South Australia, which is nudging double the national average.

At the 2016 EC-MENZ conference in Tauranga, New Zealand, Marty outlined his plans for a national association for male early childhood educators, and thanks to collaboration with another leading male educator in South Australia – Steven Cameron, the national organisation has emerged.

A male educator who's likely to put up his hand to be on the executive committee is Adelaide-based Brett Gent. He was a building maintenance worker in a school, before injury led to being placed in the OSHC. It was here that Brett felt his new career was calling. He enrolled in a Certificate III, then diploma in early childhood education before undertaking his Bachelor of Early Childhood Education

"I encourage men thinking about a career change and thinking about education, to look into studying early childhood education. The upcoming conference will be a great way to talk with like-minded people and to share ideas and experiences. It will be a fantastic networking and learning experience," says Brett.

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