
Since many decades, scholars in the field of early childhood education deplore the gender segregation in the caring professions. Research and experiments so far show that it may take decades of multiple actions to overcome the gender divide in the caring workforce. However, research that includes the voices of men in child care is rather recent, scarce and involves only very small samples of male carers. Therefore little is known about the students’ perspectives on how the gendered culture of the profession is transmitted through overt or covert curricula and how this may affect them. We present three studies that may begin to unveil how future male carers are affected by both overt and covert gendered curricula. The first study interviewed 30 students in initial training, while the second study involved 16 men in adult education for caring professions. The third study examined 1635 pages of textbooks. The studies show how both overt and covert curricula affect younger students more than their adult colleagues. The results also indicate some ways forward.

The curriculum reinforces the mother-like gendered construction of the workforce by linking courses on care and education to household and hygienic activities that are considered by male students to be inappropriate. There is an urgent need to revisit the curriculum and introduce variation, including sports and music. Danish examples, introducing sports, have shown that this may significantly influence the attendance by male students (Wohlgemuth, 2003). There is also a need to incorporate child care studies with other, more ‘traditionally male’ studies in one school, in order to enable male students to socialise with male peers during recess times, especially when adolescents are concerned. In addition, the Flemish textbooks support a very stereotypical and sexist construction of care work, with regards to children, parents and staff. It is urgent to organise systematic screenings of textbooks in order to clean them from the most blatant stereotypes. Training of trainers on gender awareness in child care and early childhood education may be most welcome, as the stereotypes not only persist in the textbooks, but also in the oral comments during the courses.

The male students in our Flemish sample did not encounter much public disagreement, or disapproval by parents, unlike their UK peers. On the contrary they feel supported by their family and close friends and they feel welcomed by female colleagues and parents, but not always for reasons that the men themselves would cherish. Indeed, in the workplace, men are often very well aware that they are ‘the exception’ as they do not have separate changing rooms or toilets. They are confronted with stereotypical thinking and tokenism, as they feel they have to perform, according to gendered roles where care is not for them, while outdoor play is. They have also internalised some gendered constructions of the work and feel that they may be distrusted in the presence of children. Their narratives show that gendered opinions also affect the women in the workforce and in order to make the care work more gender neutral, actions towards both men and women are needed.

Men who choose for child care, can be very lonely, being the only boy in the class or even in the entire school. They miss pals to talk to about other things than women’s talk and to share their sense of humour. Many of the men we interviewed, explicitly asked for the possibility of male networks, where they can exchange these experiences. During the research process, we set up an Internet chat room that was used by the secondary school students for this purpose. We unveiled some aspects of a curriculum that is embedded in what we would call an overt and covert hegemonic feminity of the profession. This seems to affect younger secondary school students who are still ‘seeking’ a suitable job for them and who are in their adolescence more, than it affects adult settlers, who come to the child care workforce after negative experiences in other fields, but having good experiences in youth work. Both groups, however, would welcome more general campaigns that challenge stereotypical male and female job descriptions. National campaigns to attract more men have been successful in Denmark, Norway, the UK and Belgium. We can conclude from these campaign that it is possible to attract more men in the caring workforce, especially adults with a rethought career, but also that the effects of such a campaign are limited in time. Persistent, long-term strategies are needed. If we additionally wish to also influence the school choice of younger male adolescents, multiple actions over longer periods of time are necessary, combining revisions of the curricula and textbooks, training of trainers, creating networking possibilities for men and sustained media campaigns that offer positive role models for men in caring work. The campaigns should not merely aim to reach men or boys, but also women in the care workforce, teachers in early childhood education, school advisory offices and labour offices.