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Gender roles in early childhood

Research published in the latest Australian Journal of Early Childhood has uncovered a number of insights into how gender issues influence the care and education of young children in Australia.

The response to a survey of parents of young children, children's services staff and students revealed some interesting results. While the low level of male early childhood workers has been raised as a serious issue by government and media, a study by Lyons, Quinn and Sumsion¹ found that 'the need to have male "role models" in children's services' (p. 6) shows 'little awareness of contemporary understandings about how children construct gender and negotiate their gender identities' (p. 9).

The research (involving academics from the University of Western Sydney, the University of Queensland, and Macquarie University) makes the point that the hysteria being created by such thinking – based on 'largely discredited socialisation theories' (p. 9) – is unfounded. Comments made by Federal Attorney General Hon. Phillip Ruddock reflect this mode of thought: 'The imbalance in the number of male and female teachers ... has a detrimental impact on education for boys.'²

Another research project (from the Institute of Early Childhood at Macquarie University),³ also published in the Australian Journal of Early Childhood, examines the negative impact that 'socialisation theory' can have on the quality of care and education in early childhood. Lee-Thomas, Sumsion and Roberts, in their qualitative study of early childhood teachers' understanding of gender equity, found that thinking grounded in child development and socialisation theories promoted a fatalistic sense of gender construction in early childhood among teachers – leading to feelings of hopelessness and resignation, which often 'inadvertently reinforced dominant gender discourses' (p. 21). Lee-Thomas, Sumsion and Roberts propose strategies to critically reflect on how we think about children's construction of gender, which will hopefully lead to better outcomes for young children in terms of gender equity.

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Examines the future of the Australian Journal of Early Childhood (AJEC); attitudes to gender and gender equity in early childhood settings; the reasons why children's and family services should work together, and how this would look in practice – also includes a new 'theorising in progress' paper, reflecting upon ethics; and much more. AJEC is Early Childhood Australia's scholarly journal, disseminating the latest research, developments and critical debate in the early childhood field.

For further information:

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¹Lyons, M., Quinn, A., & Sumsion, J. (2005). Gender, the labour market, the workplace and policy in children's services: Parent, staff and student attitudes. Australian Journal of Early Childhood, 30(1), 6-13.

²Ruddock, P. (2004). Sex Discrimination Amendment (Teaching Profession) Bill 2004, second reading speech. Hansard, House of Representatives. Number 4 of 2004, 10 March 2004.

³Lee-Thomas, K., Sumsion, J. & Roberts, S. (2005). Teacher understandings of and commitment to gender equity in the early childhood setting. Australian Journal of Early Childhood, 30(1), 21-27.

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