



Research

Men in childcare: an action-research in Flanders

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Abstract

Childcare in the Flemish Community of Belgium is, just as in many other countries, a highly gender-segregated profession. In this article I shall first describe a very short genealogy of this gender segregation in the Belgian context. I will then give account of recent quantitative as well as qualitative research conducted by Kind en Gezin and by the Training and Resource Centre for Child Care (University of Gent) and discuss the results in the light of international literature on gender segregation in child care. Finally, I will describe how this research has helped to design a campaign as well as an action research being set up in Flanders.

Role models and the culture of care

Being a father in this day and age is no easy task. Up until the mid-1970s, practically nothing was expected of a father of young children. We only have to glance through the first edition of Dr. Spock's *Baby and Child Care* (1948) to see that this hefty handbook was written solely with mothers in mind. The only role worth mentioning that Dr. Spock handed to the father at that time was to teach his preschooler to ride a bicycle. Fifty years later, society's expectations concerning the young father have done a complete about-face (Peeters & Vandebroek, 1998). A new father is expected to take on the same responsibilities as the mother with respect to his infant. However, he also needs male role models in order to be able to carry out this particularly difficult task in his own 'masculine' fashion. That is a problem because, for most young fathers, their own father was, of course, not an ideal role model: he was a product of the period in which little was demanded of fathers (Van Crombrugge & Verstaeten, 2002).

Among many scholars, there is a consensus that men working in day-care centres could function as role models for young fathers. As early as 1993, the European Commission Network on Childcare and Other Measures to Reconcile Employment and Family Responsibilities invited experts from the entire western world to come to Ravenna and share their thoughts on the subject of 'Men as carers' (Network on Childcare, 1993). They all agreed that measures to involve fathers more in the care of their children would have little effect if there were no male childcare workers employed in day-care centres. As childcare professionals, men could serve

as role models for young fathers and day-care centres could, at the same time, also play an important role as places where a new culture of childcare could be created: a culture in which there is also a place for men. Still another significant argument for men in childcare is that children would then be confronted with men who take care of them. Many experts expect that, because of this, future generations would be able to share the household tasks and the childcare more quickly and proportionally. That would contribute to equal opportunities for men and women throughout the entire society. However, the experts who were present also had to admit that, throughout Europe, there were only a few centres in which men made up a significant portion of the workforce. It all comes down to drastically increasing the number of men in the childcare sector. Let us first see just how large the 'gender gap' in the Flemish childcare sector actually is.

Few men employed

Upon accepting the unique position of Professor of Childcare in The Netherlands, Prof. Louis Tavecchio was recently interviewed by the pedagogic journal for childcare 'KIDDO' (2002) In it, Tavecchio says: 'It has always amazed me that so few men work in childcare' (2002, p. 29). I was seized by this same amazement in 1979 after I, as a young psychologist, was offered a job by the University of Gent to take part in a childcare research project. In all of the day-care centres that I visited within the framework of that project, there was not a single man to be found. Some time later, I studied the legal texts on the subject and the reason for this immediately became clear to me. Article 34 of the rules and regulations of the Nationaal Werk voor Kinderwelzijn (NWIC) [National Belgian Organisation for the Well-being of

Children] (the predecessor of Kind en Gezin [Child and Family]) was perfectly clear in 1979: 'Only female personnel will be employed to work with infants.' The NWK was, at that time, a bastion of conservatism and refused to become involved in social discussions concerning emancipation. Nevertheless, the second wave of feminism demanded a larger role for the man in the rearing of young children. The time was more than ripe to motivate young men, as well as women, to take a job in childcare.

These convictions were supported even further by what was taking root within the scientific discourse dominated by concepts such as attachment and bonding, celebrating the mother as unique and the natural and decontextualised educator (Singer, 1993; Burman, 1994). With the publication of the first edition of 'The Role of the Father in Child Development' by Michael Lamb (1976), developmental psychology discovered 'the father': 'The contributors to this first edition made concerted and often explicit efforts to demonstrate that fathers had a role to play in child development' (Lamb, 1997, p.1). The logical conclusion was: if fathers are important for rearing of young children, then professional childcare also needs male educators. Along with me, many were convinced that a new era was dawning and that this evolution would continue spontaneously. It turned out somewhat differently. The legal stipulation that excluded men from a job in childcare would remain on the books in Flanders until 1983! Within the framework of the federalisation of the Belgian public institutions in 1980, childcare came under the authority of the Flemish Government. It changed the law so that, at long last, men could also be accepted into a career

in childcare. In 1986, we were forced to admit that the effect of these new regulations was extremely slight (Peeters, 1993). The number of male employees within the Flemish childcare system remained negligible. Ten years later, on the authority of the European Commission Network on Childcare, Fred Deven (1994a), a researcher at the Flemish Centre for Population and Family Studies, carried out a study on the number of men then employed in childcare in Flanders. Once again, it was clear that a positive evolution was not to be found. Deven made a differentiation between care within the institution system (childcare centres) where 1% of the men worked, and family day-care, which is apparently – and seems to be remaining - - almost exclusively the terrain of women (0.1% men).

A smidgen of male management

Kind en Gezin recently had this study meticulously repeated and, once again, it was confirmed that childcare is indisputably a job for women: 1.16% of the employees are now men (Peeters, 2002, p.237). We can still count the number of men in family day care on the fingers of one hand: five (5) out of a total of 7409 family day care providers (0.07%). Once again, the childcare centres score somewhat better: of the 5052 employees, 83 are men (1.64%). However, the number of men who actually work with children is even smaller. Of the 3417 children care workers, there are only 12 men (0.35%). Many of the men who work in day-care centres have jobs in ordnance, such as janitorial functions, or they have staff positions. It is also curious that the private sector scores somewhat better here, but that is because of the male representation in staff positions. In the very small

crèches (8 to 22 places), there are 33 men - of the 710 - in positions of authority (4.65%). The private day-care centres (min. 23 places) score the best: 18 men among the 122 positions of authority (14.75%). Men in family day-care are, however, hardly present at all: 4 of the

1724 family day-care providers (0.23%). Then, there is also the after-school care. Of the 189 in positions of authority, 18 of those are men (9.52%) and 2.68% of the men actually work with the children.

Table 1: Number of men and women working in subsidised day care

	Admin. Function		Childcare worker/FDC provider		Janitorial functions		Staff positions		Director			
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F		
Subsidised day care centre	3	35	12	3405	38	744	29	772	1	13	83	4969
Family day care centre	3	38	5	7409	0	7	0	2	4	436	12	7892
Out of school club			25	907					18	171	25	907
End total	6	73	42	11721	38	751	29	774	23	620	138	13939

Table 2: Men in subsidised day care: percentage

		Child care worker/FDC provider	Janitorial functions	Staff functions	Director	End total
Subsidised day care centre.	7.89%	0.35%	4.86%	3.62%	7.14%	1.64%
Family day care centre	7.32%	0.07%	0.00%	0.00%	0.91%	0.15%
Out of school club		2.68%			9.52%	2.68%
End total	7.59%	0.36%	4.82%	3.61%	3.58%	0.98%

	Child care worker/FDC provider		Director		End total	Percentage men
	M	F	M	F		
Private family day care	4	1720			4 1720	0.23%
Private small day care centres			33	677	33 677	4.65%
Private day care centres.			18	104	18 104	14.75%
End total	4	1720	51	781	55 2501	2.15%

	M	F	% Men
Subsidised day-care	138	13939	0.98%
Private day-care	55	2501	2.15%
End total	193	16440	1.16%

The study by Cameron, Moss and Owen (1999) also shows that the occasional man in childcare moves into a staff function significantly faster than a woman. In interviews, various female employees have expressed their concern about this. On the other hand, it is – and remains – curious that a relatively new sector, such as ‘Initiatieven voor Buitenschoolse Opvang’ [Initiatives for After-school Care] scores badly as far as the number of male child-carers is concerned. The contribution of men in youth work and in elementary school is, nevertheless, more highly valued in society than their work with young children. Why is it, then, that there are still so few men working in after-school care? One explanatory factor could be that the after school clubs were established in the early 1990s as an

employment project for long-term unemployed women. It has only been during the last few years that these jobs have been made available to men in the same situation. In the meantime, however, women were already heavily over-represented in these centres. Moreover, these are generally part-time jobs, which are not as attractive for men. We must, therefore, report that there is a female culture throughout the entire sector.

Gender provides the explanation

The former chairman of the European Commission Network on Childcare, Prof. Peter Moss, was also intrigued by this sociological phenomenon. Together with Charlie Owen and Claire Cameron – also

employed at the Thomas Coran Institute in London – he attempted to find an explanation. In order to do this, they used the concept of ‘gender,’ which includes the various characteristics and skills that a culture attributes to men and women. Gender differs from sex, which indicates only the biological differences between men and women. According to Dejonckheere (2001, p.12), equal opportunity officer of the city of Gent and one of the promoters of the project:

‘gender and sex are closely linked by the fact that your biologically determined sex will determine which gender role (male or female) society will expect you to play. Because this is a social construct, gender is strongly susceptible to change: the differences between men and women will vary according to place, culture, ethnicity and class’.

Well then, according to Cameron, Moss and Owen (1999), gender would unconsciously also be embedded in the provisions for young children. Childcare, be it professional or volunteer, is seen as women’s work, something that women naturally do and are intrinsically better at.

This gender mechanism operates on two levels. At the individual level, the childcare employees pass on, via their own gender identity, their specific cultural constructions of the role, tasks and manners of men and women within the specific context of their work in childcare. But the gender component also plays a role at the institutional level: ‘it has had an impact on the historical and pedagogical understandings of why childcare exists, how it is conducted and organised, and what is gender appropriate have evolved through practice and policy over time’

(Cameron, Moss and Owen, 1999, p. 8) Day-care is, in fact, based on a particular concept of care: ‘mother-care’. This is, according to Cameron, Moss and Owen (1999), the primary reason for the extremely limited number of men in childcare and probably also for the meagre involvement of fathers in day-care (Peeters, 2001). This reverting to the maternal role in day-care has created a dilemma for men. Men do not feel like pitting themselves against the woman-mother version of care in childcare. For them, this is not an acceptable source of inspiration. However, there is also no ‘father-model’ as a role model because the role of fathers in the education of young children is not yet valued by society. Many of the studies or initiatives on this subject are based on the – predictable – dysfunctioning of the father. In this vein we find, in the Anglo-Saxon world, groups (Dads and Lads) that have been formed to involve fathers who have lost contact with their children or to prevent abuse (Tonkens, 2001). Thus, the role of the father is -- until further notice -- not a positive and inspiring example for male co-workers in childcare and the maternal model is not useable for men because it does not mesh with their male identity.

Men excluded?

Classic gender identity is constructed on the basis of differences. It is based on the labeling of the other as different and, therefore, uses the exclusion principle: a man is different than a woman. (Network on Childcare, 1993). This feeling of exclusion among male employees was clearly expressed in their narratives during a series of workshops that I gave in The Netherlands and Ireland in 1999 on the subject of men in childcare. It was striking to see how enormously motivated

these men were in their jobs. However, they also felt that they were barely – or rather, wrongly – understood. They bemoaned the fact that their female colleagues forced them into very stereotyped male roles (playing football with the little boys, doing carpentry and repair work). The men in the workshops regretted that the parents and colleagues did not consider them to be the equal of their female colleagues.

But I learned from the narratives I collected that services for young children are also excluding fathers (see also Ventimiglia, 1994). Here is one example from a male participant in a workshop. He observed his female colleagues and found that they never asked the fathers how the baby's night was, although they regularly did this with the mothers. Information concerning things that the child had experienced was passed on verbally to the mothers who came to pick up their children. If the father came to get the child, he got a note for the mother.

Profile of the male childcare worker

In short, men are, in fact, certainly appreciated by their female colleagues, but only because of very specific skills that are not essential for a profession in childcare. According to Cameron, Moss and Owen (1999, p.9), 'they are regarded as sort of benevolent visitors with few responsibilities'.

What is now the profile of these men who have been working in childcare for a considerable time? In order to gain insight here we have carried out a qualitative research around ten in-depth interviews of men who have been working in childcare in Flanders for a considerable time and we have also thoroughly perused the studies from other countries

that have appeared on the subject. There are very few men who have gone directly into childcare via their training. Most of them had first done something else and had only later realised that they really enjoyed working with children.

Many men have worked, with great pleasure, with children's youth movements, children's workshops, sport clubs, etc. It, therefore, seemed interesting to us to aim the campaign at youth workers and to do our best to convince them that a job in childcare could also be an attractive option for them. Also, the part-time jobs in after-school care could offer interesting perspectives for men. Some of the men who were questioned combine such a part-time job with a training course or a hobby that they are passionately interested in.

The research shows that these 'oddballs' are all highly motivated in their work. At a certain point in their lives, they made a conscious decision to take this job and have had to put up with a great deal of opposition from their environment. Those who had received their education in what used to be the childcare training college describe this course as geared exclusively towards women. Two of the men each gave separately the same example: in biology class, the menstruation cycle was discussed in great detail, but nothing at all was told about male sexuality. They generally receive support from their families and close friends but must put up with a good many offensive remarks from their broader surroundings. It is also notable that they experienced resistance from those centres in the educational system that should have been offering support in helping them choose a course of study or

profession and from the schools for childcare and from day-care initiatives where they had done internships. Very few men work together with other male colleagues, but those who do find it an extremely positive experience. Their relationships with parents are not easy, either. They regularly experience some mistrust or are called upon to justify themselves in situations in which their female colleagues would not have to do so. Also, conflicts with their female colleagues are always just around the corner. Their role is sometimes too limited to minor repair work and playing typically male games with the boys.

However, this does not discourage the male co-workers. They see themselves as pioneers who are in the process of creating a new climate of care, which also has a place for men and for fathers. Dahlberg, Moss and Pence (1999) talk in this context about 'early childhood institutions' as public forums situated in civil society in which children and adults participate together in projects of social, cultural, political and economic significance. Those institutions could become a forum for reflecting on the role of the father. It is a place where fathers and male co-workers – together with the female colleagues – search for a personal interpretation of the role that men could play in the lives of young children.

A diversity of identities

In order to avoid exclusion of men, childcare organisations should resolutely strive towards a multiplicity of gendered identities (Cameron, Moss and Owen, 1999). Vandenbroek (2001) translates this as 'multiple identity': we have to rid ourselves of the childcare institutions that are based on one single identity – be it gender, culture or ethnicity. There are

various visions, various ways of working that are used by various people and all of these have emotional, cultural, ethical and historical foundations and can, therefore, all be contested. Each separate identity must continually be called into question and be made visible through dialogue and debate. This philosophy can be found in the Reggio Emilia approach, but also in other parts of Europe, such as in the Sheffield Children's Centre (Meleady and Broadhead, 2002), where diversity is the norm, not the exception.

Ghedini (1995) describes how a gender-neutral policy was created in the Pen Green Centre, which has an equal number of male and female employees. Illustrations are screened to make sure that they are 'male-friendly' and interactions with parents were recorded on video and examined to see if the carers had as much contact with the fathers as with the mothers. It should be kept in mind that male co-workers are not only role models for the fathers who bring their children to the centre; they can also make the centre itself more 'father-friendly.'

Men in Childcare

In the Flemish Community of Belgium the legislative context has recently become more favourable towards men in childcare. In early 2002, the Flemish government approved the new regulations concerning quality, of which article 12 is significant: 'Active attempts will be made to hire males as well as females and autochthonous as well as ethnic minorities as childcare workers and in staff functions.' Kind en Gezin (Child and Family) the public agency responsible for childcare, had already – in 2001 changed the name of the profession from 'child carer' to 'day-care educator'.

By doing this, the gender-neutral perspective has been expanded to include the educational aspect of the job. The Minister of Welfare and Equal Opportunity, whose sphere of responsibility includes childcare, has increased the salaries in the day-care centres by approximately 30%. Within a few years, when the maximum effect has been achieved, the salaries in the childcare sector will be comparable to those in other sectors. On the labour market there is, at the moment, a shortage of childcare workers, so that the umbrella organisations and the employment office are more easily convinced to participate in campaigns to attract more men to this profession. The research of VBJK-University of Gent inspired a campaign on men in childcare in Flanders in this vein. Therefore, in September 2001, within the framework of the European Social Fund (Objective 3), a consortium of organisations submitted the project 'Men in Childcare.' The promoters are the Training and Resource Centre for Childcare which is affiliated with the Department of Social Welfare Studies at the University of Gent and the Emancipation Officer for the city of Gent. Important partners from the childcare sector are the governmental organisation Kind en Gezin [Child and Family], the umbrella organisations for the day-care centres and two organisations which have the expertise at their disposal with regard to gender and equal opportunities were also involved. The expertise of Fred Deven of the Flemish Centre of Population and Family Studies who did research on this topic (Deven, 1994) was also called in.

The project's first objective is to create a campaign on the theme 'Men and Childcare', inspired by similar campaigns

in Denmark. These intensive campaigns have resulted in an increase in the number of men in childcare to 25% in after-school care and 5% in the provisions for young children in Denmark (Jensen, 1998). It appears that it is important to create an image of the male childcare worker that is different than the typically feminine image that is associated with caring for children. That is why we refer to 'male' professions: manager, bookkeeper, construction worker and treasurer. In this way, we can use the photos and the text to point to an aspect of the childcare profession that is attractive to men. The posters and folders were widely distributed among job seekers at the employment office. During the recruitment of students for the training course 'School Age Childcare', they will be used throughout the entire Region of Flanders. The campaign will also attempt to stress the importance of male educators towards parents. We are, after all, well aware that some mothers – but also fathers – have a problem accepting a man as the carer of their young child. Kind en Gezin has agreed to cooperate with this aspect of the project. The posters were sent to all of the facilities and information concerning the possibilities of a job in the childcare sector can be requested via the website. The campaign began in early 2003 and will be concluded in November 2003 with an open conference. The beginning of the campaign can already be seen as a success. The impact in the media was huge. Just about all forms of media picked up on the theme and it was also discussed in a positive light in debating programmes and talk shows on television. We have now been successful in putting the theme 'men and childcare' on the agenda and in sensitising policy-makers, parents and childcare co-workers to the idea. The first results (September 2003)

are very promising: while before the campaign only 6% of the participants of the course for out of school worker were men, from April 2003 on this figures has increased up to 20%.

The poster campaign is part of a broader project on men and childcare that is being subsidised by the European Social Fund. In this vein, training courses for after-school childcare have been screened for gender neutrality. Moreover, a manual is being created for childcare initiatives in order to make their selection and recruitment policy more male-friendly. All the men who are now employed in the childcare sector will be invited to a meeting in May in order to participate in an exchange of ideas on the role of men in the lives of young children. It is our hope that networks will be created from this meeting where these discussions can be continued and, this way can provide the initiative for the forum that Dahlberg et al (1999) have advocated. We are aware that it will cost a great deal of time to achieve a noticeable change in one of the most gender-oriented professions in the world. However, in Flanders we have used this project to put the theme 'men and childcare' on the agenda and hope that, through this campaign, an impetus can be given in allowing men to play an equal role in the raising of young children, as fathers and as professional care-givers.

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