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**A gendered contribution to play? Perceptions of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) practitioners in England on how their gender influences their approaches to play**

**Early Years**

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## **Abstract**

There is a persistent suggestion that the lack of men who choose to work with young children (0-5 years) is detrimental to children's learning and development. This study analysed whether practitioners believed that men who work with young children adopt specific approaches within a play pedagogy. Practitioner beliefs about how their gender influences their practices were gathered through qualitative surveys and open-ended, photo-based interviews. This paper argues practitioners use conflicting scripts to discuss their gendered approaches to play; it proposes that opportunities to explore gender critically, through gender sensitivity training, are vital for ECEC practitioners to ensure that a high-quality workforce is developed that can be flexible in its practices and pedagogy.

**Key words:** play, practitioner gender, Early Childhood Education and Care, pedagogy

## **Introduction**

There is a continuous debate around the need for more men in the ECEC workforce and whether they bring something 'refreshingly different' (Wohlgemuth 2015, 401). In England, the number of men working in ECEC has stagnated at around 2% (Simon et al. 2015). The purpose of this article is to examine practitioner beliefs around specific gendered approaches

adopted by the adult within play pedagogy and the conflicting scripts they use. Hogan (2012) uses the term 'gender blind', in the Australian context, to describe an unwillingness to examine gender critically; she suggests an opportunity to do so should be a key element of course content for those training to work with young children. Urban et al. (2011) also call for critically reflective practitioners supported by a critically reflective context.

### *Connell's masculinities (2005) and Synodi's play labels (2010)*

Connell's framework of masculinities (2005) has had a significant impact on gender research; it offers a useful lens to support an understanding of how practitioners position themselves, or are positioned, in gendered ways. The '*Hegemonic*' could reference male practitioners who display dispositions and skills considered superior to those of their female counterparts – such as the role of the disciplinarian, a projection of authority or a charismatic personality (Brody 2014, 12). The '*Subordinate*' could reference those who reject stereotypical male behaviours (Sargent 2005) and engage in non-typical gender play such as doll play rather than the outdoor, sporting activity they are often associated with (Cushman 2008). The '*Complicit*' could reference the male fun figure (Sandberg and Pramling-Samuelsson 2005) who has freedom to pick and choose his practices, leaving the more mundane tasks to his female counterparts (Mallozzi and Campbell Galman 2015), or female practitioners using scripts supportive of hierarchical gender practices. '*Marginalised*' could reference those who are presumed to be gay or 'other' (Sumsion 2000) having chosen to work with young children, a problematic choice when wider society equates homosexuality with paedophilia (Wernersson 2015). The male practitioner is thus positioned as one to be watched when engaging in play with young children.

Gender inequalities in the ECEC workforce may continue to be reinforced if practitioners feel compelled to practise gender in specific ways (Warin and Adriany 2017). Other factors in the English context, such as the low status demographic of the workforce (Moss 2014), the diverse qualifications they hold (Nutbrown 2012) and the diverse reasons that people want to work with young children (Osgood 2009) could also impact suggesting a ‘intersectionalist’ approach to understanding gender interactions (Christensen and Jensen 2014) is required. Martino and Kehler (2006) highlight the inadequacy of focusing specifically on gender when addressing the moral panic surrounding the ‘call for more male teachers’ for young children and boys in particular (p. 113). They suggest a need to look more broadly to consider the impact of other factors, such as class, age or culture, which all combine to impact on how practitioners’ identities, and therefore behaviours, are shaped.

This practitioner identity will impact on the roles adopted by the adult in a playful pedagogy; Synodi (2010) offers an overview of useful labels to describe them. These roles are: **Organiser; Stage manager; Observer; Listener; Assessor; Planner; Mediator; Co-player; Scribe**. Practitioners may relate to these suggested labels in gendered ways. For example, stereotypical male (or even hegemonic) attributes could be seen as **Organiser, Stage manager, Assessor** or **Planner**, whereas stereotypical female attributes could be seen as **Observer, Listener, Mediator, Co-player** or **Scribe**. If practitioners feel limited in their choice of roles because of their gender, then this situation can contribute to a continual reinforcement of gender inequalities in the workforce (Brownhill and Oates 2016).

### ***Gender Sensitivity Training as part of a ‘Competent System’ (Urban et al. 2012)***

One suggestion to disrupt this ‘limitation of role’ is the idea of Gender Sensitivity Training (GST) (Warin 2015). Although this kind of training is often highlighted as a key way forward,

it is not apparent whether there is a shared understanding of what the concept means and what it could look like in practice. Robinson and Jones Diaz (2006) stress the importance of practitioner reflexivity in terms of the gender implications of their work with young children whilst Warin (2015) proposes ‘the training of gender sensitivity’ (p. 103) suggesting it ‘has to become a key element of initial teacher training (ITT) and continuing professional development (CPD)’; she cites ‘pockets of gender-sensitisation work’ (2018, 107) taking place such as Josephidou (2018). Hogan (2012) describes her pedagogical approaches with ECEC student teachers which include ‘spaces for honest, open and critical discussion on the topic of gender’ (p. 1).

A ‘competent systems’ model (Urban et al. 2011) could provide such spaces; Urban et al. (2012) use this terminology to suggest we need new ways of thinking about professionalism in ECEC, ways underpinned by critical reflection on values which needs to take place on the four different levels of i) the individual practitioner, ii) the institution and team, iii) inter- institution collaboration and iv) governance (p. 33). They cite Vandebroek et al. (2010) to position the practitioner as one who should be continually asking ‘Do I do the right things’ rather than ‘Am I doing this right?’ This positioning aligns with Hogan’s encouragement (2012) to ensure that those who are going to work with young children are given both the time and space to engage critically with ideas and issues around gender. Urban et al. (2012) assert the importance of professional development to develop this reflective criticality and GST could be a key component of this.

### ***A gendered contribution to play?***

A number of perspectives inform the debate about whether men have a specific contribution to make to children’s learning through play and so whether their absence from the ECEC sector

is problematic. Some suggest there is little difference in gendered practitioner play practices (Brandes et al. 2015; Brownhill 2014; 2015; van Polanen et al. 2017) whereas others highlight specific gendered practitioner play behaviours (Hedlin and Åberg 2013; John et al. 2013; Sandseter 2014; Bosacki et al. 2015; Sak 2015; Børve 2016). Furthermore, it is also suggested that if men choose, or are constrained, to engage in gender specific ways in play, then their presence there can be detrimental to the promotion of gender equality on a more macro level (Hedlin and Åberg 2013; Jones 2015; Tennhoff et al. 2015; Brownhill and Oates 2016; Warin 2017; Warin and Adriany 2017).

If there is little difference between the way male and female practitioners interact with young children in play, then the perceived moral panic (Brownhill and Oates 2016) regarding children missing out on engaging with men in the early years is unfounded. The idea that male practitioners are needed to engage in specific play pedagogies attributes, dispositions and approaches are not gender specific (van Polanen et al. 2017) must thus be questioned. Brandes et al. (2015) conclude that the gender of the practitioner cannot be scrutinised in isolation without considering also the gender of the child. Van Polanen et al.'s (2017) findings also agree with the suggestion that there is little difference between male and female interactions; Besnard and Letarte (2017) argue that despite this lack of difference, the presence of men in an ECEC setting had a positive influence on children's social development. Huber and Traxl (2018) proposed that mixed gender staffing had a positive impact on children in terms of 'social mobility' although they noted some limitations, both in their own research and beyond, into 'gender-specific analyses of educator-child interactions' (496). They recommend larger samples, long-term studies and a focus on variables such as children's personalities, 'peer group dynamics' (ibid), relationships between practitioners and the pedagogical approach of the setting.

Other research suggests that differences can be seen thus supporting the argument that more men are needed in the ECEC workforce because they bring a missing pedagogy (Børve 2016). There is a well-documented view that men will engage more in physical (Bosacki et al. 2015), outdoor (Cushman 2008) and risky play (Sandseter 2014) with young children; these are all areas which are claimed to be supportive of excellent outcomes in terms of children's development (Bento and Dias 2017). John et al. (2013) contribute to the narrative around men's engagement in physical play with young children by drawing on previous fatherhood research (Lewis and Lamb 2003), although they do not specifically relate this to ECEC practitioners. This positioning of the male in physical play aligns with the 'fun big brother role' (Warin 2015) yet this could be a role he is expected to fulfil rather than one adopted through choice (Jones 2015). Sak (2015) also contests the argument that there is little difference between male and female practitioners; he found that of 451 pre-service early years teachers (f=231, m=220) there were significant differences in their 'overall sense of self-efficacy' and in particular in their confidence in managing the environment.

A further argument is that of the male practitioner as role model in play, particularly for young boys (Sak 2015). Huber and Traxl (2018) found that young boys are drawn to male practitioners, suggesting a need for 'same-gender exchange and identification', whereas young girls are less impacted by the gender of the practitioner. Boys lacking a male role model at home are said to be affected the most (Wood and Brownhill 2018) by this lack of male practitioners. The idea of young children, and specifically boys, needing male role models has already been well explored (Brownhill 2014). It is a contested proposition but one that recurs frequently and is well documented in the research literature (Wernersson 2015). The argument often discussed is that of the 2.8 million lone parents in the United Kingdom who are predominantly women (ONS 2017) suggesting that many children have no access to a 'father figure' in their daily lives. The confusion around this debate arises from the fact that there is



no clear definition of what a role model is, what dispositions and attitudes the role model is supposed to be demonstrating nor how these are gender specific (Brownhill 2014). Men are also uncomfortable with being cast in this role and can see it as a 'burden' (Brownhill and Oates 2016). Furthermore, this discourse risks presenting the 'lone mother' as inadequate; yet Golombok et al. (2016) assert that 'solo motherhood, in itself, does not result in psychological problems for children' (409).

An additional prominent narrative is that the call for more men is 'androcentric' and based on a deficit view of women (Olsen and Smepllass 2018). What is of further note is the fact that the inclusion of more men in the ECEC workforce could be detrimental to furthering gender equality; women have excelled in this workforce for many years, have supported children in learning through play, and it would be taking something from them if men now invaded this territory (Tennhoff et al. 2015; Olsen and Smepllass 2018). Furthermore, if men act in gender specific ways when they engage in play then gender stereotypes will be reinforced (Hedlin and Åberg 2013; Jones 2015; Børve 2016; Brownhill and Oates 2016; Warin 2017).

Warin (2017) believes that there is a presumption by some (here her participants) that men can provide an important gender balance to the ECEC sector because there are gender specific roles, based on 'heteronormative ideas', to be carried out. She argues rather that the call should be for a diverse range of gender-flexible practitioners who do not feel constrained to act in distinct ways because of their gender. In this way an increase of men in the ECEC workforce, engaging in flexible play behaviours, could be supportive of addressing much wider gender issues (Besnard and Letarte 2017; Huber and Traxl 2018).

Therefore, men can be seen to take up a contradictory position within the ECEC workforce because they are seen as both the 'wanted' and the 'unwanted' other (Tennhoff et al. 2015). This research contributes to the conversation about whether the call for more men is justified

by considering whether practitioners themselves believe there are gendered differences in how they see their role within a pedagogy of play. It asks:

What perceptions do ECEC practitioners, in the English context, have about how their gender impacts on their approaches to play?

## Methods

Practitioner perspectives were captured through qualitative surveys and interviews. The initial sample was 32 ECEC practitioners (males = 8; females = 24) working in a diverse range of ECEC settings (n= 13), both rural and urban, in the southeast of England. Of these, 21 surveys were returned (males= 4; females = 17) with 13 of these practitioners (males = 3; females = 10) agreeing to be interviewed. Full details were provided to all participants through participant information sheets and ethical approval was granted by the Higher Education Institution where the author was enrolled as a PhD student. Although each participant had the right to remain anonymous in the survey, they were asked to share contact details if they were happy to participate in a follow up interview. The surveys had two sections, one inviting participant responses about play and one about practitioner gender. Table 1 offers some additional information on the range of the sample.

Qualification level	Postgraduate: 6 Graduate: 5 Below graduate: 10
Age:	18-24: 9 25-39: 6 40-50: 6
Role	Early years teacher: 7 Nursery practitioner: 13 Play leader: 1

Number of years spent in ECEC workforce	Less than 1 year:	1
	2–5 years:	6
	6–10 years:	10
	11–20 years:	3
	20+ years:	1

Table 1 Information on the range of the sample

Participants who were interviewed brought photographs that they had taken as part of the normal practice in their workplace to document children’s playing and learning. The interviews were 60 minutes long; they were recorded and then subsequently transcribed. A hybrid approach to analysis (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane 2006) was adopted by firstly looking for codes and then themes across the data. At a second stage of analysis, Connell’s framework of masculinities (2005) and Synodi’s play labels (2010) were used as a lens to consider the ‘gender scripts’ (Burn and Pratt-Adams 2015) utilised. The results section sets out three of such scripts that were drawn on in both the surveys and the interviews. All names have been anonymised.

## Results

The findings highlight the ‘usage of gender scripts’ (Burn and Pratt-Adams 2015, 6) by a small sample of ECEC practitioners, from a diverse range of settings (n=13) in the English context, to discuss their practices, experiences and observations in relation to play pedagogy. The key contrasting scripts used, often simultaneously by the same participant, were that i) there were no differences in practitioner gendered practices, ii) more men were needed in ECEC because they had something ‘refreshingly different’ (Wohlgemuth 2015) to contribute and iii) it was difficult for men to be as effective as women in the ECEC workplace. These three scripts are discussed more fully below. An explanation of the script is given and then illustrated by example quotations drawn from the data. Participants are referred to as P followed by a number to distinguish their responses. Additional information is given in brackets relating to their

gender, age, amount of years working in ECEC and whether the data is from the survey or interview. For example, P1 (f; 41; 8 years; s) denotes that Participant 1 is female, 41 years old, has worked in ECEC for eight years and that this response is taken from the survey.

***Script 1: There's really no difference***

This theme was used to describe all the codes which suggested the practitioners were adopting a gender-blind approach (Hogan 2012); there were many claims that they did not recognise any differences between male and female approaches to playing with the children. An illustration of this is when P1 (f; 41; 8 years; s) states:

*To be honest in my own past experiences of working with male practitioners, I didn't see a significant difference in their play approach, other than due to personality rather than gender. For example, one male practitioner I worked with was very loud and boisterous with the children and would play very physical games. But at the same time, I have worked with several female practitioners who have been equally loud, boisterous and physical with the children*

Instead they attributed differences to other factors such as age:

*We've had one woman who... she's in her 60s... you know she got on with all the children... but obviously with age comes experience... the more confident you get... the younger practitioners [are] maybe a bit shy especially when they are starting (f; 21; 4 years; i)*

Many used the term ‘personality’ to describe the key influence on practitioner pedagogical choices. There appeared to be a strong thread that this was the defining impact on practice and the term was used in an essentialist way to signify that neither they nor their colleagues had any agency to change their personality:

*I think that the gender does not impact on how they play with young children. I think it is more about the personality of the person rather than gender (P11: f; 28; 10 years; i)*

Others adopted a gender-blind approach often using the phrase ‘*I’ve never really thought about it before*’ indicating that knowing they were coming for interview had forced them to consider their perspective. One recognised gender blindness (Hogan, 2012) when she realised at the interview that she had worked with a male practitioner:

*I actually forgot that the TA [teaching assistant] was a male practitioner... I thought I **have** [her emphasis] worked with a male practitioner cos I just thought of him as one of us (P5: f; 22; 5 years; i)*

When using this script, participants did not ascribe Synodi’s play labels (2010) in a gendered manner however there could be some alignment with Connell’s ‘complicit’ label (2005) as this disinclination to examine gender could be said to support hierarchical gender narratives.

### ***Script 2: Men bring something different***

Although most participants adopted a gender-blind approach initially, their responses often developed into a more gender-binary discussion. They described gender distinct approaches at times, as they described gendered practices which aligned with Synodi’s play labels (2010),

inferring that males bring something superior to the world of ECEC in their approaches to play.

The well-documented, role model discourse (Brownhill 2015) was utilised constantly:

*a child with no input from a male at home would benefit greatly in having a male practitioner in order that they do learn that there are differences in the way males and females see things (P2: f; 47; 24 years; s)*

They also illustrated how male practitioners could, ‘complicitly’ (Connell 2005), reinforce gender stereotypes by interacting with children in gender specific ways during play:

*The children often look to the male for rough and tumble play or construction play (P2: f; 47; 24 years; s)*

Some also began to use a feminisation discourse (Skelton 2012; Burn and Pratt-Adams 2015; Brownhill and Oates 2016) to suggest that it is not beneficial for children to be exclusively exposed to female practices. One adopted a deficit model of maternal approaches when she discussed her own practices:

*Mumsy, caring, comforting... ‘oh you’ve hurt yourself... I’ll pick you up’...nurturing probably a little bit too much sometimes and I need to allow these children space to build their own resilience and do their own things as well so I know that I am guilty of that... being a little bit too maternal... P4 (f; 45; 18 years; i)*

A positioning of males hegemonically (Connell, 2005) can mean the female practitioner is then viewed in a deficit way. This script also highlighted female anxiety about risk taking with some describing how this meant that the outdoor area became the domain of the male practitioner. One recounted:

*K... the male, would usually take them outside... I suppose he was seen as the fun one so if we went outside I was a bit more conscious on like... oh we can't do that... Oh the climbing frame I don't want them to fall... Oh we can't have the bikes and balls out together* P5 (f; 22; 5 years; i)

Some male practitioners often felt obliged to play football; P17 (m; 22; 5 years; i) mentioned that as soon as the children saw him, they would kick a football towards him; almost as if it was a conditioned response. P11 (f; 28; 10 years; i) recounted how she loved football and being outside, but she was aware that this made her come across as 'not very feminine' leading me to the assumption that she felt her gender was being policed. P17 (m; 22; 5 years; i) is sent on forest school training because none of the females are willing to do it; they are 'wussies' as his line manager (P2: f; 47; 24 years; s) tells me.

Males were often seen as 'more exciting' by the children according to the practitioners. P15 (f; 21; 4 years) had used this phrase in the survey to describe male practitioners. In the interview, she developed this idea saying:

*... the children reacted differently to the males than they did to us... I noticed how ...when they kind of came in the room children would run up to them and climb on them in a different kind of way and act differently to a male than they did to us*

***Script 3: Males are constrained in their practice***

At other times the male practitioner was positioned as marginalised (Connell 2005) and without a voice. P1 (f; 41; 8 years; s) wonders whether male practitioners' behaviour is different from females' because they are in a minority and so they are 'othered' in the ECEC workforce (Burn and Pratt-Adams 2015). She ponders:

*I wonder, as male practitioners are usually in a minority in early years environments, whether their play approaches may be influenced by how they fit into a very female dominated team. Do they always have a voice when activities are planned or initiated in a setting?*

P2 (f; 47; 24 years; s) suggested that male practitioners did not always have the necessary skills:

*I have worked with many male practitioners; the sense of play is often excitable and the children often look to the male for rough and tumble play or construction play. However, I have seen that more skilled practitioners are able to lead play away from this and offer the same skills and play as female practitioners.*

In stating this she is 'subordinating' male practices (Connell 2005) and stressing that they need to become more like females although not all of them could do this only the 'more skilled'. She also describes how male play behaviours are scrutinised;



*... it's fair to say that all females will have that extra vigilant eye with a male...  
for safeguarding and for making sure that they are stopping the bad play*  
[meaning over boisterous in this context],

demonstrating how the male practitioner can be viewed through a 'cloud of suspicion' that Brody (2014, 352) claims is generated when men engage in ECEC. There may be a concern that the male practitioner is becoming too intimate with the child if he engages in, for example, rough and tumble play.

## **Discussion**

The contrasting scripts that this small sample of practitioners used to discuss gendered practices suggest they would benefit from further opportunities to critically engage with issues around gender as part of their professional development (Hogan 2012). Practitioners shared contradictory perspectives even within individual discourses; at times they considered there were no gender differences in professional practice (Script 1: There's really no difference), yet at other times both genders considered males brought something specific, whether that was in a negative or positive way (Script 2: Men bring something different; Script 3: Males are constrained in their practice).

By using Script 1 (There's really no difference) participants did not place much value on the moral panic concerning the lack of men in ECEC described by Brownhill (2014). They were also potentially highlighting a 'gender flexible' (Warin and Adriany 2017) approach which recognises that traditional masculine or feminine traits are not gender bound. However, if these gender-neutral scripts are a result of gender blindness or gender denial then there are problematic implications for the workforce. They may have been making the same assumptions

that Hogan had found with her students that ‘gender in early childhood education is largely unproblematic’ (2012, 1).

These assumptions could indicate a resistance to ‘exploring gender critically’ (ibid) either because of gender blindness (suggesting a more passive approach) or gender denial (suggesting a more active refusal to acknowledge differences). Gender denial scripts were potentially used by participants to demonstrate their professionalism (Tennhoff et al. 2015). Aigner and Rohrmann also found denial of practitioner gender differences, alongside an emphasis on personality (2012), and Connell used the term ‘gender denial’ when she noticed that, even within gender diverse workforces,

There is something here that goes beyond underplaying gender issues. There is a rejection of even the possibility of gender discord, of divergent interests or practices. There is a distinct element of gender denial in some current discourse (Connell 2011, 36).

When participants emphasised the importance of personality over gender, they gave conflicting messages about their workforce; conceivably they were inferring a workforce should be employed according to their personality rather than their skills. This stance, however, would absolve the individual of the responsibility of carrying out best practice by only engaging in the kind of play that suits their personality. This perspective contradicts the ethos of a child-centred curriculum (DfE 2017, 6) and places the agency of the child and the agency of the adult in opposition to each other, further confirmation that a lack of opportunity to discuss gender implications in ECEC is unhelpful in terms of developing a ‘competent system’ (Urban et al. 2012) of gender sensitive practice.

Warin and Adriany (2017) suggest ‘gender sensitivity’ is a key element in being able to ‘confront and disrupt gendered performances in children’ (384); one might add it could also be

used to disrupt gendered performances in other practitioners. If practitioners make assumptions that are not sensitive to gender, they may fail to be inclusive and supportive of their colleagues. Such a scenario is not supportive of encouraging more men into ECEC and therefore highlights how the 'no difference' script could be contributing to a much deeper embedded way of thinking about gender.

If men are perceived to be the 'prized commodity' (Jones 2007) of Script 2, then it seems evident that we need to recruit many more than the present 2%. Yet this argument is contentious in that it suggests that the 98% females who presently make up the English workforce are deficient in some way. Instead of merely looking to recruit more men into ECEC the emphasis should be on the need for practitioners who can bring these apparently missing behaviours so that the focus is taken away from practitioner gender and turned towards practitioner skills and dispositions. This shift in emphasis would mean a reduced concentration on the 'missing men' (Thornton and Bricheno 2006) who can provide the 'missing pedagogy' and rather on recruiting, and offering professional development opportunities to, a diverse workforce with diverse skills who can be flexible and not have to rely on their personality or their gender to inform their practice. A practitioner, free of the straitjacket of expected gender behaviours (Brownhill and Oates 2016) would also fit Warin and Adriany's description of the gender flexible practitioner (2017). By concentrating on practitioner skills and dispositions, the gender-binary discourse that Ashley (2003) warns against is avoided. In this way, in answer to the question posed by Nordberg (2004) and cited by Brody (2015): 'Are they mainly employed as... pre-school teachers or mainly as men?' the ECEC workforce could respond '*They are employed as professional, highly qualified and highly effective pre-school teachers*'.

There is a danger that if male practitioner behaviours are elevated over female behaviours, then this script contributes to the continuation of a hegemonic discourse which has been so powerful

in reinforcing gender inequalities (Connell 2005). Consequently male practitioners would not be ‘breaking a mould of orthodox masculinity by adopting professional roles within “women’s work”’ (Warin 2014, 97), rather they would be reproducing it in their behaviours (ibid.) Such behaviours could reflect a male sense of ‘privileged irresponsibility’ which allows them to become the fun figure (Sandberg and Pramling-Samuelsson 2005), or the ‘fun big brother’ (Warin 2015), in the setting. In so doing, they might disregard the caring elements that do not fit with their perception of how to be a man (Warin and Gannerud 2014) so that they would have less accountability for the more humdrum or tedious aspects of the job (Mallozzi and Campbell Galman 2015). By choosing the outdoor area they might be choosing to ‘specialise in those areas... which align more with their male identity’ (Evans 1997, 228–229) or an ‘island of masculinity’, to cite Evans as she draws on Egeland and Brown’s terminology (1988) to describe how males in a female dominated profession ‘shape their work role to be more masculine’ (228-229). There is also the issue that the male practitioner may not choose these gender-reproducing positions for himself but rather he is manipulated into doing so ‘to avoid being identified with other subordinate masculinities’ (Brody 2014, 12).

Script 3 (Men are constrained in their practice) alludes to the ‘othering’ of men in the ECEC workforce (Burn and Pratt-Adams 2015; Sumsion 2000). Brody (2014) highlights how ‘The UK is not a particularly welcoming place for men in childcare’ (100); they may not be thought to have the necessary skills for ‘women’s work’ (Lupton 2000) or their female counterparts may be protective of their domain (Burn and Pratt-Adams 2015). Thus, a deficit picture is painted of the male practitioner. In this script, he is seen as both subordinate to a more highly skilled female practitioner and at risk of marginalisation. In the micro cultures of the ECEC environments used in this study, traditional male traits, such as engaging in boisterous play can be seen at times as inferior to female traits; a subtle recognition that men in ECEC are

interlopers, tolerated if they can conform to the ‘feminised’ environment (Cameron et al. 1999) and suppress behaviours they may feel are ‘properly masculine’ (Cushman 2005, 233). Perhaps the only way that they will become less constrained is if their numbers increase so that they are no longer ‘hypervisible’ and therefore have the space to develop the necessary skills without being under the gender spotlight.

Female practitioners can also be constrained in their practice if they feel that they have to perform in stereotypical ways something alluded to by P11 (f;28; 10 years; i) when she discussed her love of playing football with the children. If practitioners did not feel compelled to choose gendered behaviours but could be ‘gender flexible’ (Warin and Adriany 2017) in their practices, neither gender would be ‘idealised’ or ‘demonised’ (Bhana 2016, 49).

## **Conclusion**

This article has argued that ECEC practitioners, in the English context, use conflicting scripts to discuss their gendered approaches to play. They would therefore benefit from opportunities to engage in professional development which includes gender sensitivity training. Without such opportunities, it could be suggested that initiatives to recruit more men into ECEC may be misplaced. Such initiatives could have little impact on wider societal gender issues if practitioners continue to draw on conflicting scripts. Introducing gender sensitivity training to the ECEC workforce could move the emphasis to one that looks for missing pedagogical behaviours such as gender flexibility (Warin 2017) and an ability to ‘critique gender’ (Hogan, 2012) as part of a ‘competent system’ (Urban et al. 2012).

## **Disclosure Statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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