

**Title:**

**Who do you want me to be? An exploration of female and male perceptions of  
'imposed' gender roles in the early years**

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**Abstract**

This paper provides an exploratory discussion surrounding the views and experiences of women and men who work/train in the early years (0-8 years) by bringing together select findings from two independent doctoral research projects. In an effort to weave together the voices of females and males working/training in the early years sector, this paper focuses its attention on the different ways in which their working roles are constructed and the possible ways in which this leads to the imposition of gender roles upon professionals in the 0-8 workforce in England.

**Key Words**

Early years, gender roles, working practices, professional identities

## **Introduction**

In contemporary debates about childcare and education we believe that the voices of women and men who work in the 0-8 sector in the United Kingdom (UK) are rarely heard. This paper brings together select findings from two separate and independent doctoral research projects which sought to capture and explore the voices of women and men in the early years sector (0-8) in a central county in England. The attention of this paper focuses on a central question: *Who do you want me to be?* This question emerged from informal discussions between the two authors whose individual research raises concerns about the expectations of women and men who work/train in the early years sector and the constraints which are imposed upon their working practices. To facilitate an exploratory and focussed discussion, this paper will specifically consider tensions that relate to government policy, local and national agendas, and the expectations of parents, managers and staff associated with the presence and 'imposed' working practices of women and men in the 0-8 sector. A review of associated literature is initially offered by way of contextualising the position of women and men who work in the early years sector.

## **Review of the literature**

### ***Women in the childcare workforce – who do you want me to be?***

Women childcare workers dominate the 0-5 workforce with 98% of them being female (Cameron, Owen, and Moss 2001; Nutbrown 2012), a situation that has not changed for many years. This workforce continues to struggle in the construction of its own professional identity, in part because of the gendered nature of childcare work, the power of other groups such as governments, and the market economy of childcare and other professionals who impose upon it their definitions of what a childcare worker should be. Several of these impositions are discussed below.

*Who do you want me to be – a minder for the children?*

Historically, the emergence of care and education of young children in the UK appears linked to ‘imposed’ ideas about the family, women’s roles within it, and the role of the state (Lewis 2003). Until the end of the last century UK childcare provision appears sparse, un-coordinated and fragmented (Cameron in Brannen and Moss 2003; Pugh and Duffy 2006) while more recently, social and economic changes have led to the development of what many commentators regard as a narrow, instrumental understanding of childcare (Moss in Brannen and Moss 2003; Osgood 2006; 2009). Moss (2006) suggests that childcare can be seen as an industry in which the childcare worker is trained through an industrial-vocational system of competency training and awards. The efforts by the previous Labour government (Department for Education and Skills (DfES) 2006) to professionalise this workforce through the provision of an integrated qualifications framework and the creation of a new graduate level Early Years Professional Status (EYPS) were welcomed by many in the sector. However, the formation of a coalition government in 2010 instigated a review of early education and childcare qualifications (Nutbrown 2012). In its final report, one of Nutbrown’s recommendations was the creation of a new early years specialist route to Qualified Teacher Status (QTS), specialising from birth to seven:

An early years teacher will need to demonstrate the same skills and meet the same standards as are required by any other teacher. I think of an early years teacher as being ‘specialist’ in early childhood development, play and learning as elsewhere a teacher might be ‘specialist’ in a particular curriculum subject. (Department for Education (DfE), 2012b, 58)

However, while the government (DfE 2013, 27) accepted that graduate leadership is the best way to improve outcomes for young children, it has created a new role – the Early Years Teacher (EYT) – while rejecting Nutbrown’s recommendation of attaching QTS to the role;

in doing so it continues to devalue the status of those who work with the under-fives. In a highly critical response to the rejection of QTS for EYTs, Nutbrown (2013, 10) suggests ‘...the watering down of good quality qualifications, and the implementing of a two-tier status for “teachers”’.

Unfortunately for many professionals in the sector such things are nothing new; for most of their working lives early years practitioners have been subject to frequent qualifications and status changes (X, 2011). There is little evidence to suggest that any of the recent ‘imposed’ initiatives (DfES 2006; 2007; DfE 2013) will involve practitioners themselves in the construction of a democratic form of professionalism that ideally provides a space for both female and male workers to be change agents within their own profession, and to build their own models of professionalism.

*Who do you want me to be – low paid and of low status?*

The childcare workforce and the position of women within it has started to receive some interest over recent years yet what is apparent is the imposition of low wages and often poor working conditions for many practitioners in the sector (see Cameron, Owen, and Moss 2001; Colley et al. 2003; Colley 2006; Moss 2006; Osgood 2006; 2009). Calder (in Miller and Cable 2008) notes a link between this occupationally gendered and segregated workforce and the work being regarded as low pay and low status (as previously highlighted). Cooke and Lawton (2008) found workers in a low pay threshold experiencing frustration because of imposed levels of responsibility aligned with low pay.

*Who do you want me to be – a subjugated workforce?*

Feminist sociological theories provide valuable insight into the position of women in the care workforce in general, providing critical insight into how others impose upon, construct and

shape this workforce. In examining women's growing entry into areas of work, writers such as Davies (1996) note the invisibility of women's experiences in traditional sociology. In exploring the position of women in the care workforce, feminists have drawn upon the ideas of Bourdieu, particularly in relation to his concepts of capitals and habitus (Bourdieu 1977; 1986; 2001). For example, Colley (2006) explore the nature of childcare work to reveal gendered and class positioning in relation to vocational training through the creation of a vocational habitus.

Colley's (2006) study of childcare students in Further Education (FE) training analyses the processes involved in learning how to become a nursery nurse through vocational education training. Colley notes how care courses such as nursery nursing socialise and discipline young women into fulfilling the role of carers, often for the benefit of middle class parents. Her findings show how girls, usually from lower working class backgrounds, who resist this socialisation were much more likely to leave the course early. These students failed to adopt the required demeanour and disposition in order to appear professional because of their use of inappropriate language, exotic dress, a lack of self-control in relation to their behaviour and emotions, and a failure to adopt an appropriate moral disposition. She further suggests that the primary raw materials on which these girls learn to labour, in a Bourdesian sense, are themselves because successful trainees who possess particular dispositions, particularly in term of controlling their emotions and exhibiting a sense of moral propriety, have to work further on their own feelings in order to learn to labour appropriately.

Skeggs (1988) along with others (see Reay 2000; MacNaughton 2005) use Foucauldian concepts (Foucault 1977; Dreyfus and Rabinow 1982) to explore women's position in the workforce through an interrogation of disciplinary technologies that keep women workers in their place. For example, Bates' (1991) early study of vocational training notes the care workplace is not just a place to develop skills; it incorporates more covert social processes

such as screening and disciplining. Both Colley's and Skeggs' work show how the care worker is constructed and how an identity is imposed and shaped through habitus and the micro-politics of power in the workplace and training programmes.

### ***Men in the 0-8 workforce – who do you want me to be?***

Men represent an extremely small percentage of the early years (0-8) workforce and have done so for many years. With statistics suggesting that men represent just 2% of the 0-5 workforce (Haywood 2011) and 19% of the primary sector (DfE 2012a), concerted government campaigns (DfE 2012b) and institutional recruitment drives have been realised, urging more men to work in the early years (0-5) and primary school (5-11) sectors in an effort to help strike a gender balance and address concerning levels of academic achievement in boys in comparison to those of girls. Further 'drivers' behind this calling for more men include concerns relating to boys and absent fathers, pedagogic practices in schools and settings, and the promotion of 'male' behaviours, all of which are explored in the remainder of this *Review of the literature*.

### ***Who do you want me to be – a father figure?***

The Office for National Statistics (ONS) (2007) reported that children in the UK were three times more likely to live in one-parent households than in 1972. The nuclear family is valorised by the suggestion that boys without fathers in their lives are experiencing a deficient upbringing as opposed to those whose fathers are present (Golombok 2000). By employing more men in the 0-8 sector it is argued that boys will have greater access to a 'stable male' (Jones 2008, 694) or a substitute/surrogate 'dad' who can relate better to them, supporting them in their development, modelling good behaviour and providing them with a required level of stability and consistency (Office for Standards in Education, Children's

Services and Skills (OFSTED), cited in Clark 2008). Smith (2004), however, questions how men are meant to serve as both a teacher and a father in the classroom with X (2011) arguing that men may not feel ready, able, nor willing to assume this ‘imposed’ father figure role. Cushman (2005) also questions the perceived benefits of these father figures by highlighting how some children have ‘present’ fathers who are neglectful or abusive; assertions that these children are ‘better off’ (232) than those with no father figure are strongly refutable.

*Who do you want me to be – a ‘male’ educator?*

Griffiths (2006) describes how it is perceived that as the 0-8 education workforce is predominantly female practitioners will deliver/teach in stereotypical feminine ways – ‘quiet, co-operative, verbal, fine-motor, indoor, artistic and passive kinds of activities’ (Biddulph 1995, 145) – that favour girls as opposed to boys. This feminization of practice is blamed for boys ‘switch[ing] off’ from their learning (Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) 2007, 3) which results in their underachievement in comparison to girls; by bringing more men into the 0-8 sector there are assertions that they will provide alternative forms of provision which incorporate ‘movement, vigour, ‘hands-on’ [and] natural activity’ (Mulholland and Hansen 2003, 214) that is more in line with ‘‘male’ interests and declared preferences’ (McPhee 2007, 65). Ashley (2001), however, argues that what motivates and interests boys is actually what motivates and interests all children. Warrington and Younger (2006, 182-3) support this, suggesting that so-called ‘boy-friendly pedagogies’ are actually good practice pedagogies that are supportive of learning of all pupils regardless of gender. This brings the efficacy of ‘imposed’ pedagogical approaches of men into question, especially as Francis (2008, 119) expresses concerns about the ‘absurdity in expecting male teachers to teach...in predictable or uniform ways on the basis of their maleness’.



### *Who do you want me to be – a ‘male’ role model?*

Due to the amount of contact young children have with female practitioners in their early education/schooling, concerns over boys’ abilities to ‘learn how to grow into men’ (Parkin 2009, 6) exacerbate the calling for more men in the 0-8 sector. Imposed expectations that these men will serve as ‘male role models’ and support boys in constructing ‘normal’ male behaviour are highly anticipated (Moore 2012). This exhibition of ‘proper’ maleness subscribes to the notion of hegemonic masculinity which describes the dominant form of masculinity within a setting or society (Connell 1995; 2002), accentuating certain characteristics of the modeller that include competitiveness, discipline, power, physical strength and aggression. Concerns as to whether these qualities are appropriate for male role models to emulate have been raised, particularly as working in the 0-8 sector is synonymous with those characteristics associated as being feminine: ‘patience, empathy, flexibility, tolerance, kindness...gentleness and affection’ (Balchin 2002, 31). In recent years, however, there has been a gradual shift towards what Cushman (2005, 233) refers to as a ‘holistic approach’ whereby male practitioners incorporate both masculine and feminine traits in an attempt to ensure that inter- and intra- personal skills, compassion and sensitivity are strong features of their practice. Whilst advocated notions of this exist at a government level (Gove in British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) 2011), men’s efforts to exhibit these ‘alternative’ qualities are largely inhibited by restrictions placed on their interactions with children and the mistrust that these engender (see Harris and Barnes 2009); there also remains a perceived need by males to challenge homophobic and paedophilic assumptions by being ‘properly masculine’ (Robinson 2002).

### **The research**

The research reported in this paper is taken from the separate and independent doctoral research work of the two authors who sought to capture the voices of women and men in the early years (0-8) sector respectively. The authors openly recognise and acknowledge here the

differences between the two research projects and their original aims. X's research focussed on exploring the views of female early childhood practitioners in Higher Education (HE) who were employed as teaching assistants and nursery nurses in early childhood education and care settings (0-5) whereas X's research took the form of a study of men who were either working as qualified early years teachers, nursery nurses, teaching assistants or after-school providers in the 0-8 sector or were training to be teachers. Both research projects were undertaken in a central county in X, England. The two research projects embraced and justified the use of a mixed methods approach to data collection (Tashakkori and Teddlie 2003; Oakley 2005), both adopting a 'mixed' staged approach, as advocated by Clough and Nutbrown (2007), which is summarised in Table 1:

**[INSERT TABLE 1 HERE]**

The research was gathered over a three year period (X) and a one and a half year period (X). Data gathered from X's research was analysed using a feminist post-structuralist stance, recognising the challenges of voice work (Cooke-Sather 2007) by drawing on Bourdieu's notion of capitals (Bourdieu 1977; Adkins and Skeggs 2004) and Foucault's disciplinary technologies (Foucault 1977; Foucault in Dreyfus and Rabinow 1982) as tools of data analysis and discussion. Data gathered from X's research was analysed using frequencies of occurrence (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2005) (Stage 1), qualitative content analysis (Stage 2) and an adaptation of grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967) (Stage 3).

The presentation of results offers pertinent findings from both research projects relating to the impositions that were both felt and acknowledged by women and men in the early years (0-8) sector; these impositions emerged independently from the separate analysis of the authors' respective research data as highlighted above. It is important to note that this paper is not attempting to present 'as one' the research findings from two very different research projects.

Instead, the paper serves to use the separate voices of women and men as a means of providing some insight and discussion into what it is like being a woman and a man in the early years sector. Its purpose is to explore what shapes their different experiences and conditions, and how the concept of gender roles aids us in understanding them. Care has been taken to protect the identity of those who took part in the research; the ‘presentation’ of participants below varies between the two studies as a gentle reminder that the data is being drawn from two separate research projects.

## **Findings**

### ***Women in the childcare workforce***

Findings from X’s research acknowledge various ‘impositions’ that were both felt and acknowledged by women in the 0-5 sector; these include:

- The ‘imposed’ expectations of love and passion for working with young children
- The ‘imposed’ changes in status and qualifications
- The ‘imposed’ pay and working conditions in the early years

### *The ‘imposed’ expectations of love and passion for working with young children*

Participants in the focus groups (Stage 1 (S1)) and interviews (Stage 2 (S2)) talked about the passion they had for their work and their goodwill. The quotations below from S1 reflect the emotional labour that practitioners gave to their work and reinforce, from a cultural perspective, expectations of women as caring and passionate about their work with young children:

Yes, you are always thinking about it even like when you are out shopping, you see something and think that could be nice in the setting for the children. (Participant One, Focus Group One (FG1), S1)

It comes automatically; you think the children would love that because you are so passionate about your job whereas some jobs there is no passion. I think our job is a passionate job. (Participant Three, FG1, S1)

### *The 'imposed' changes in status and qualifications*

A complaint from participants was the way in which they were subject to the imposition of regular changes in qualifications and status. This led to feelings of frustration, even anger, because of the way it is imposed by others without their consultation. The quotation below from S2 shows how an experienced female childcare worker has been the object of frequent qualifications changes over many years:

I have two statuses, no three statuses: senior practitioner status, a Higher Level Teaching Assistant (HLTA) and Early Years Professional Status (EYPS) – I am a guinea pig. I have more worthless pieces of paper. I have a tree locked away in a cupboard somewhere because that is how it is, because they change it as they go along but they are worthless. (Participant Two, Interview, S2)

Participants said one of the most negative things about the job was not being recognised for their knowledge, experience and qualifications, again highlighting the way in which things were imposed upon them without dialogue:

I still feel that the early years workforce does not get nearly enough recognition for the important and hard work that we do. I know many graduates in the workforce who are not recognised as professionals. Salary is also not reflected in this as we earn nowhere near the same as the teaching profession. (Sure Start Community Nursery Manager, Questionnaire, S3)

These two quotes highlight the imposition of a professional identity on the early years workforce which has excluded them and has not enabled them to feel valued or play a part in its construction. It also confirms how childcare workers, the overwhelming majority of whom are female, are subject to frequent changes in status and qualifications.

#### *The 'imposed' pay and working conditions in the early years*

The issue of pay was often mentioned by participants in X's research at S1 and S2. A number of participants talked about 'imposed' expectations to cover classes to provide teachers with time to plan (Preparation, Planning and Assessment Time (PPA)) or to work beyond their contractual hours on a regular basis:

...you are expected to help with the planning, working when the teachers go off to do their PPA and you are supposed to be in there, yet you are possibly £10,000 less a year than that person but you're expected to do the same job and actually you are not treated as an equal really are you?... I was told I'd get 15p extra once I had finished my degree making my wages up to £5.65. (Participant Four, FG1, S1)

If you are on a permanent contract they can pay you from nine to twelve and one to three but you have to be in school since eight and you leave at four. (Participant Nine, FG1, S1)

Participants also talked about the imposition of discipline and exclusion by other professionals in their settings, particularly in the mainstream school and nursery environments:

It is being ordered around and quite often that can involve being ordered away from a child you are there to support and sent to do the photocopying. (Participant One, Interview, S2)

Sometimes as teaching assistants we get frustrated because there are a lot of meetings and things that go on that we are not aware of. I do sometimes think they could think of us as a bit more professional. (Participant Three, Interview, S2)

These quotations serve to highlight the imposition of low pay in the 0-5 sector in the sense that it is not negotiated, and the use of power which is imposed on them by other professionals.

### ***Men in the 0-8 workforce***

Findings from X's research acknowledge various 'impositions' that were both felt and acknowledged by men in the 0-8 sector; these include:

- Imposed roles as a man in the 0-8 sector

- The ‘imposed’ positive effect of the male role model
- The ‘imposed’ “burden” of being a male role model

*Imposed roles as a man in the 0-8 sector*

Respondents at S2 felt that they had to act as a “back up” for parents (Will, teaching Head teacher), a sentiment which was shared by James (Head teacher) who felt pressured to be a disciplinarian:

I’ve had it where you’ve got a child, it’s often a boy as well that hasn’t got a Dad at home, and they’re [Mum] at the end of their tether like with behaviour or other things that happen at home and they say “He’ll only listen to a man” or “He’s better if a man tells him”. They seem to use [me] as the ultimate in...in the line of discipline.

Ben (a former Key Stage co-ordinator) commented on how certain roles he undertook whilst working in school were shaped by the requests or comments made by female colleagues:

They would say to me “Could you get something heavy down off the top shelf?” and “You’ll be doing the football team then!”...and suddenly you’re sort of pigeon holed...

This notion of ‘pigeonholing’ resonated with the kinds of activities that male practitioners/ teachers engaged in; S3 interviewees in X’s research spoke at length about the range and amount of ‘sports’ and ‘exercise’ that they led in their school in comparison to their female counterparts; expectations with regard to the ‘gendered, stereotypical activities’ they were to

engage with young boys – playing ‘army’, using ‘tools’ and ‘fixing things’ (S3) – were also emphasised aspects of their practice.

*The ‘imposed’ positive effect of the male role model*

Respondents at S1 of X’s research were asked to express their level of agreement/disagreement with a series of statements relating to the male role model. The idea that male role models have a positive effect on the academic achievement of young boys generated the largest variance of opinion, with 31% (n26) either disagreeing or neither agreeing nor disagreeing with the statement. Views shared at S2 were also critical of this statement:

It’s not...it’s not a case of if you want to raise attainment then you’ll be wanting blokes in your school. You actually want the best teachers, performing the best practice with the best resources that are available; that’s the bottom line. It doesn’t really matter whether you’re male or female. (Will)

Further challenges to the ‘positive effect’ of the male role model emerged when S1 respondents attempted to define the term ‘role model’. While responses from the 0-5 sector showed a heavy subscription of the role model having a ‘positive impact’ on children’s lives, particularly in relation to their ‘behaviour’, the notion of learning ‘bad things from a role model’ (Teaching Deputy Head teacher, 7-8 yrs) was made by 11 respondents from the 5-8 sector. Illumination of this at S2 alluded to the idea that male footballers were bad role models for young children due to their swearing (attributed to Wayne Rooney) and incidences of deliberately kicking others (attributed to David Beckham).



### *The 'imposed' "burden" of being a role model*

X's research highlighted a perceived "burden" that was felt by male practitioners in being a role model for young boys in the early years (0-8). 99% (n83) of S1 respondents saw themselves as role models for boys, in part because being a role model was seen as being 'part of the job' (Class teacher, 6-8 yrs). However, at S2, respondents acknowledged the unwillingness of some male teachers to actually serve as a role model:

It's a sort of double edged sword and we've the privilege about being able to have this influence on children...but for some people it's perhaps off-putting because...it comes with a burden that I've got a job to do here and erm...and maybe I ought to be a male role model, I'd rather just be a teacher thanks, don't...don't label me with male or role model at all thanks... (Ben)

This sentiment of being burdened by their male role model 'status' was also felt at S3 with interviewees acknowledging various pressures they felt from 'parents', the 'school' and 'staff' to be a role model.

### **Discussion**

To facilitate an exploratory discussion between the existing literature and the findings from the two separate research projects, comparisons will be made under three 'tension' headings which emerged during the separate analysis by the two authors of their respective data; these include:

- Classic 'gendered' qualities/characteristics and roles
- Expected 'confined' roles
- 'Shaped' roles

In an effort to enrich this discussion, reference to additional findings from the authors' separate research projects are included, where appropriate.

### ***Classic 'gendered' qualities/characteristics and roles***

X's findings confirm those of others, for example Moyles (2001), where female practitioners talk about the passion and love for their work with young children. Osgood (2006, 1) suggests that this relational aspect of early childhood work can only be acknowledged through the production of an alternative, feminist discourse that counters dominant masculine hegemonic ones. *But how do men and women working in the early years co-produce alternative discourses?* At the present time it is difficult to see how men currently working in the sector could engage in a discourse that incorporates a discussion about their passion and love for their work with young children. We feel that there are further questions for consideration: *is it possible that being passionate about working with young children is linked to the expectations we have of women involved in care work? Why do female childcare workers often talk about the passion they have for their work with children? How and why did this word become so important in the discourses about their work?*

It appears from X's research that female practitioners, in struggling to construct a sense of who they are in the workforce, place a great deal emphasis on their emotional labour and feelings in relation to their work with young children. Vincent and Braun (2009, 15) found that many childcare students gained considerable emotional satisfaction in their work but note '...little room for the exercise of autonomy and professional judgement'; this is evident in X's findings where practitioners are subject to exclusion and exploitation. While Giddens (1979) suggests that individuals do not simply react to ideas imposed upon them but are actively involved in reproducing and interpreting them, Osgood (2006, 273 in Wood 2008) argues that the individual agency of a group of childcare practitioners is not unified nor mobilised, and

therefore practitioners do not possess sufficient power and belief in themselves as professionals to challenge or resist the roles that are being imposed upon them.

In X's research, findings suggest that men perceive their role as being an *objective* rather than an *emotive* one; when identifying qualities/characteristics of the male role model at S1, respondents selected those which may be deemed to be masculine e.g. *authoritative* (21%, n18) and *a good sense of humour* (31%, n26) as opposed to those which may be considered 'feminine' in nature e.g. *emotional* (6%, n5) and *generous* (8%, n7). This modelling of classic masculine qualities/ characteristics was also evident at S2:

If there is an absent father or there aren't other males in the child's life, reinforcement of some of the more masculine characteristics, like being a disciplinarian... is probably an expectation [of the role model] to make up for the lack of certain characteristics around them. (Ben)

Whilst it is acknowledged that there are multiple ways of 'being a man' (Warin 2006), in X's findings there is an emphasised 'expected way of behaving' (S3) as a man in the 0-8 sector with strong subscriptions to notions of hegemonic masculinity e.g. playing 'rough and tumble' with young children (S3) and being 'good at sports' (S1). Efforts to emulate a more caring form of masculinity, as alluded to by participants in all three stages in X's research, were seemingly hindered by the various pressures felt by men from staff members and parents to present the 'correct view of men to children' (S3). This goes some way to supporting the findings of Sargent (2001) who found few parents who wished for artistic, nurturing and emotionally expressive men to enter their young children's lives.

### *Expected 'confined' roles*

X's research suggests that the habitus of the early years workplace is one in which relationships are constructed through women's roles as mothers and carers; this may, in part, explain why they use the word 'passionate' about their work with children. Moss (2006) suggests that in this gendered discourse the worker is the substitute mother, underpinned by an assumption that women have an innate capacity through their maternal instinct to play this role. X found that one of the two main routes into childcare work is through mothers volunteering in their children's schools, thus reinforcing cultural notions that women are naturally good at childcare work, work that has and continues to be regarded as generally low in status and low paid, the implication being that anyone can do it.

Fowler (in Adkins and Skeggs 2003, 483) notes that we are in danger of being so mesmerised by stories of women's progress in the workplace today that we fail to notice the increased polarisation of class and gender inequalities and the indirect contribution of women's work to this, particularly in the caring services. X (2011) suggests that women, as mothers who move into childcare work through volunteering activities in their children's schools, may be unwittingly increasing inequalities in the workplace. Robins and Silock's (2001) research on nursery nurses notes how they are often cited alongside parents as helpers in schools, most often under the heading of 'non-teaching staff', thus leading to and perpetuating confusion about the role of nursery nurses, and an undervaluing of their skills and importance. In a Foucauldian sense, this linking of these two groups could be seen as a form of disciplinary technology (Foucault in Dreyfus and Rabinow 1982), normalising their positions in the social structure of the classroom or nursery, working to keep both groups in their place in the hierarchy of the setting. It is in this sense that normality is created for practitioners, and therefore volunteering could inadvertently play a part in constituting and reinforcing a gender regime in early childhood and care settings.

In X's research, participants highlighted a number of 'expected' roles that men 'took on' in the 0-8 sector, namely being a male role model (S1), a father figure (S2) and "the sporty one" (S3). The notion of physical competency is one that is emphasised by Cushman (2008, 131) who found that the second most cited reason New Zealand (NZ) principals gave as to why they thought schools needed more male role models was to provide sports leadership. At S1 a Teacher (7-8 yrs) made the following written comment:

I am not very good at sports/athletic[s] – so should I avoid becoming a primary school teacher?

This highlights a tension between the expectations of others to emulate particular roles effectively – *'You are good'* – and the actual capabilities of the male role model in being willing or indeed able to undertake these – *'Am I good?'*. Indeed, whilst Will (S2) considered his '...relationships with young children [to be] based on a more paternal role' due to his age and position in his school (a teaching Head teacher), the efforts of one interviewee ('K') at S3 to embrace his father figure 'label' were "blocked" by setting managers when it came to the caring for and toileting of very young children (0-2); expectations that he would "be the manager" of the outdoor play provision instead "confined me to the cold" (S3). This restriction on 'K's role serves to reinforce the 'labelling' that is associated with many males who work in the early years (Owen 2003).

### ***'Shaped' roles***

X's findings suggest female practitioners in the 0-5 sector are subject to a range of disciplinary technologies and the micro-politics of power that attempt to shape and construct their roles within early years settings. X notes her female participants' frustration at the way in which they are frequently subject to qualification changes and the way in which others,

including governments, develop policies which attempt to construct a professional identity on their behalf. Early years practitioners appear to experience exploitation and exclusion through low pay, contractual arrangements and the power of other professionals who construct and 'shape' their roles within early years settings. Evident in X's findings are feelings of betrayal amongst practitioners, particularly in relation to the hard work they have put into gaining qualifications, and the way in which other professionals exclude them and fail to acknowledge their expertise. There appears to have been little change in terms of a recognition and validation of their roles in spite of the rhetoric surrounding the previous government's professionalization agenda (DfES 2006) and their supposed role within in. More recently, the coalition government's (DfE 2013) efforts to raise the quality of childcare, whilst worthy in itself, has the potential to create further divisions across the early years workforce because of the exclusion of QTS, as previously discussed.

X's findings give some indication to numerous influences that 'shape' the roles of men in the 0-8 sector. Previous government ministers have clearly promoting traditional images of men (see Carrington and Skelton 2003) along with recruitment literature from the former Training and Development Agency for Schools (TDA) only hinting at conventional notions of what it means to be a 'man teacher' (Skelton 2007). It is thus not surprising that stereotypical masculine conventions such as authority (S1), discipline (S2) and strength (S3) were considered by male respondents to be traits of the male role model for emulation. Further 'shaping' of the roles of men seemingly result from the 'context and situation' that they find themselves working in; this is particularly evident in the views of Will (S2):

My children come from very socially disadvantaged backgrounds... they come from dysfunctional families... single mums will come to me and say "Mister Hughes, can you talk to them [the mother's child] about their behaviour because you're a man; they'll listen to you?"

There is the assertion that Will's role of authoritarian is shaped not only by his gender but also by the expectations of others i.e. parents/carers, a sentiment supported by the work of Sargent (2001). One should be mindful, however, that these expectations are not limited to parents/carers; the expectations of work colleagues (Ben) and of setting managers ('K', S3) help to extend this limited range. Whilst Walkington (2005, 54) suggests that the practices of educators are shaped by 'personal...identity', X's findings would suggest that the roles of men are shaped more by external influences.

### **Conclusions and recommendations**

In this paper we set out to explore the voices and experiences of women and men who work in the early years sector (0-8) through the presentation of research findings from two separate research projects. We have highlighted 'imposed' gender roles in the early years from the female and male perspective. It is evident that there is much tension which surrounds these roles, particularly as a result of the influence of policy making, the expectations of others and the micro-politics of power in the workplace. In the introduction to this paper we proposed the question: *Who do you want me to be?* Whilst we recognise the limitations of our respective studies with regard to sample size and scope, our findings suggest that there are numerous expectations of women and men in the 0-8 sector and that these continue to subscribe to traditional stereotypical gender roles which do little to reflect

- contemporary notions of women and men and
- what a professional in the sector is and should be.

We feel that there are missed opportunities in the 0-8 workforce at present to allow professionals to be who they are; we also feel that we should be celebrating the diversity and capacities of those who work in the 0-8 sector as opposed to 'straight jacketing' them in confining roles. Not only does this raise questions as to how this is achievable but also how

we move beyond current notions of what women and men bring to the early years sector. We feel that this is a key question for policy makers and practitioners to consider further.

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**Table**

<b>Stage number</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>
One (Stage 1 – S1)	Two focus groups discussions with 25 female students (in total), all with a minimum of two years of paid experience in the 0-5 sector	174 questionnaires (postal) to men who were training or working directly with children (0-8) (48% (n84) return)
Two (Stage 2 – S2)	Seven semi-structured interviews with individuals from the S1 focus groups	One focus group interview with men (n3) who were, or who had experience of, working at an operational level in primary school settings
Three (Stage 3 – S3)	Questionnaires (postal) to all participants from S1 and S2 (48% (n12) return at S1); 100% (n7) return at S2)	Six individual semi-structured interviews involving men who worked across the 0-8 sector, following up lines of enquiry from S1 and S2

TABLE 1: A summary of X's and X's 'mixed' staged research