Men-only support spaces in early years education: a step towards a gender diverse or a gender divided workforce?

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ABSTRACT
Currently, 3% of the early years education workforce is male, a figure that has remained stubbornly resistant to change over the last four decades. Research has shown that support is key to increasing the number of male employees in this sector. In recent years, there has been an increase in the demand for male-only support activities, such as men-only training courses, or support groups. Whilst these methods are popular in order to establish gender-diverse workforces, an inherent danger is that single-sex support can exacerbate binary thinking and entrench gender differences. This paper explores the role of single-sex support in gender diversifying the early years workforce and asks when, and for whom, such spaces may be effective or valuable. The discussion is based on data collected during the GenderEYE project, which aimed to look at strategies for, and understandings about, the recruitment and support of male early childhood education professionals.

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Introduction

This paper is based on a study undertaken in the UK between 2018 and 2021, funded by the UK’s Economic and Social Research Council entitled the GenderEYE project. The aim of the study was to research how, both internationally and in the UK, men are recruited, supported and retained in the early years education (EYE) workforce (for children aged 0–6); and to use the evidence gained to produce a clear theoretical rationale and practical resources to enhance efforts to create more gender-diverse, gender-sensitive approaches. The study was theoretically driven by queer theory and was premised on the idea that men’s presence as educators in the early years of childhood, can provide a catalyst for raising gender awareness and practicing a gender-flexible pedagogy (Warin 2019, 2018).

We begin by recounting two incidents that occurred in the course of the GenderEYE study which raise questions about the value of single-sex support and set the scene for the paper’s discussion of single-sex support as a form of gender divisive practice or as a step towards gender diversification. The first is an incident experienced by the second author who had been invited to consult with a single-sex group of male EYE practitioners that had recently been organised in one English city. In this paper, we use the
term ‘EYE’ as an internationally recognisable term, in preference to ‘Early Years’ (EY) which describes the relevant education sector in the UK, or Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) a term in use on many European countries. Warin arrived at the location of the meeting whilst the group was already engaged in a pre-meeting which, she was told was exclusively for male practitioners. She was politely asked to wait outside the meeting room until the group was ready for her because, she was told, the group was addressing a sensitive matter which concerned men only. Later, this was explained as a concern about men’s management of their feelings regarding parental mistrust and being positioned by parents as potential child abusers. Warin’s experience produced contradictory feelings of exclusion and sympathy.

The second incident concerns our response to an online advert we noted during our fieldwork. This was a poster for a training conference, displaying the image of a smiling man and child with the text ‘A Celebration of Men in Early Learning and Childcare’. The small print at the bottom of the poster indicated that this (it was hoped) would be an all-male event. However, in order to ensure equal access, the event would be repeated the following week for anyone else who wished to attend. The event organisers confirmed that this was indeed a single-sex conference, adding that the demand for such events was high. Furthermore, during our presentation on this topic at a ‘Men in Early Years’ (MITEY) Conference, London, 2019, a member of our audience had attended the above ‘celebration’ and found it to be very positive. Yet such strategies are based on a gender essentialist theoretical underpinning which confirms and entrenches gender differentiation rather than a ‘troubling’ of gender and dismantling the gender binary, the theoretical approach behind the queer theory. The incidents we have described raise the question we explore in this paper concerning the value of single-sex support groups: when, how and for whom are they helpful?

**Literature review**

**The recruitment and support of men in the EYE workforce**

We ground this specific debate in the broader literature concerning the presence of men in EYE and recent theoretical and practical interest in gender diversification of the early years workforce. The literature on this aspect of the gender and education intersection has developed apace within the last two to three decades. During this time there has been a growing recognition that the greater involvement of men within the caring professions has the potential to transform gender relations (Connell 1995; Murray 1996; King 1998; Drudy et al. 2005; Brownhill 2015; Warin 2016). Parallel to this development is the understanding that the transformation to a more gender equitable society and the production of more gender-flexible roles and relations must incorporate a shift to men’s caring roles (Lynch, Baker, and Lyons 2009; Warin 2014).

The relevant literature represents a considerable range of theoretical and ideological viewpoints concerning a value for a greater male presence in EYE. Traditional gender essentialist rationales for increasing the number of men emphasise gender differences and argue for male teachers to act as ‘male’ role models. This is often perceived to be necessary for the development of boys and to compensate for a lack of father figures in some homes (Warin 2019). This view translates into practices that are based on
heteronormative assumptions and that replicate the traditional domestic gender roles of mothering and fathering within early years settings. This trend has been prevalent in UK public media discussion and has led to an academic debate about the presence of male practitioners as an opportunity for gender transformation (Drudy et al. 2005; Brownhill 2015; Warin 2016), or a threat to it (Skeltion 2002; Cushman 2008; Martino 2008). A newer approach based on queer theory disrupts traditional gender binary thinking and argues for the presence of male staff as a potential catalyst for a gender-flexible pedagogy enabling young children to see that men and women can behave interchangeably (Warin 2016, 2018; Xu, Warin, and Robb 2020).

Specifically, within the UK (where the authors are based), the low presence of male practitioners in the early years has been a focus of academic and policy research since Cameron and colleagues drew attention to it in a 1998 ground-breaking conference (Owen, Cameron, and Moss 1998; Cameron 2006). Up until this point, there had been little questioning of the assumption that the education and care of young children should be seen as anything but ‘women’s work’. This policy focus has ebbed and flowed since that time with a resurfacing in the recent Early Years Workforce Strategy document which advocated for a more gender-diverse workforce, prompting the Gender-EYE research study to investigate the recruitment, retention and support of male EYE workers.

Support strategies to retain men in the early years and the popularity of single-sex approaches

The research literature on men’s trajectories in early education shows that a higher proportion of men compared with women leave this work (Brody et al. 2021). The research team was already aware of practices over the last decade that had been developed to support and retain this minority group of workers. In 2016, a landmark Men in Early Years conference was held in Southampton by David Wright, leader of a chain of nurseries, together with colleague Gary Crawford from Southampton City College. Further conferences took place in Bradford, Bristol and London between 2017 and 2019, initiated by the growing number of Men in Early Years support groups in these areas, and the MITEY (Men in the Early Years) campaign led by the Fatherhood Institute. In some areas of the UK, there have also been initiatives to attract fathers into early years careers (Sharp 2018); the rationale being that men have experience looking after their own children and may consider professional development in this field. Single-sex support has also been explored in some European countries such as Norway and Germany under the term ‘male working groups’ (Emilsen and Rohrmann 2013) although their impact has yet to be documented.

The use of single-sex support groups for men in EYE and in primary education has had a research history since the end of the 1990s. At the very end of the 1990s, Thornton’s study (1999) seemed to be one of a kind in initiating and evaluating a single-sex support group for male teacher trainees in primary schooling. However, others have followed in identifying and evaluating this practice as a key strategy for preventing male drop out from the training stage and in the first years of employment (for example, Pepperell and Smedley 1998; Lewis 2002) More recent illustrations can be found in Warin (2016) who cites the practice of Swedish teacher-educator Geir in his use of single-sex
teaching groups for male and female trainees in EYE and also in the practice described by Burn and Pratt-Adams (2015) English teacher-educator academics who set up an all-male support group for trainees in primary education. They identified that training can often bring problems as men occupy a minority role in this context, for example, some of the men felt they were being judged by female students and staff in lectures and during placements (2015, 38). During the support group meetings set up by these authors, men made emotional disclosures, in particular around the experiences of stereotyping and feelings of isolation (34). By sharing experiences, the group not only validates the others’ feelings but it also allows the men to ‘disown’ the negative comments they might receive, as Burns and Pratt-Adams indicate, ‘it was less about them as individual men and more about the complex gender dynamics that can arise from men in predominantly female groups’ (2015, 39). This is important as it allows the men to step back from the immediate criticism and negativity in order to make sense of the process of othering and to explore strategies for change. The group also played a role in retaining male trainees through the development of supportive relationships and indeed friendships. It provided a ‘safety net’ and a ‘safety valve’ (Burn and Pratt-Adams 2015, 38) to allow problems to be addressed before ‘dropping out’ became a consideration. It provided a space where men could do masculinity differently; they could ‘let down their masculinity ‘shields’ (2015, 43). Whilst this relevant work on primary school male trainees is instructive the issues for male early years teachers are intensified even more given they are in the greater minority and that the childcare aspects of the early years work attracts greater stigma as ‘women’s work’.

The psycho-social, therapeutic, ideals underlying these types of single-sex group practices have a history outside of a specific educational context and are firmly rooted in practices developed by feminists within the Women’s Movement in the 70s (see Rowbotham, Segal, and Wainwright 1979) and also in the related Men’s Movement (Stein 1982). Within the Men’s Movement the therapeutic use of single-sex all-male group developed into a form which led to a strengthening of gender difference and an explicit attempt to reify ‘essential’ masculinity, for example in the ideas promoted by Robert Bly in what has often been labelled the Mythopoeic Movement. Lingard and Douglas (1999) provide a critical account of this movement showing how it led to practices such as wilderness workshops where male-only groups attempted to discover a ‘lost’ masculinity in male bonding rituals, often in outdoor spaces engaging in drumming rituals and other forms of ‘male bonding’. Whilst such practices may seem quite extreme there have been other, more diluted but still gender divisive, replicas of this kind of practice. For example, in the early years of the millennium two popular gender discourses combined to produce a strategic emphasis on initiatives promoting ‘Lads and Dads’. These initiatives, often based in various football-focused practices and locations, promoted lad/dad bonding as a way of compensating for the perceived ‘dangers’ of the absent father (see also Wood and Brownhill 2018). Concurrent with the policy discourse about absent fathers, strong in the UK in the late nineties and early years of the new millennium, Warin (2018) was the very pervasive and popular discourse about boys ‘under achievement’ in education (Epstein and London 1998) and a ‘crisis of masculinity’. These related discourses led educators to enhance boys’ masculine identities which itself was seen as a strategy for promoting their greater self-esteem and consequently, it was argued, their greater likelihood of educational achievement. The underlying gender
essentialist theory behind such approaches was often unquestioned as has been pointed out in the feminist critique of this approach (Mills 2000; Jackson 2002; Skelton 2002; Martino 2008; Jackson 2010).

**Theoretical framing**

*‘The personal is political’: connecting queer theory and feminism*

The GenderEYE project was underpinned by queer theory which aims to dismantle the gender binary, and to recognise and subvert gender essentialist assumptions. The researchers have theorised the presence of men as the provision of opportunities for male and female staff to behave in interchangeable ways and indeed to create a third space for gender non-conformity (Warin and Price 2020). Queer theory troubles understandings of sex, sexuality and gender as natural, innate, biologically or physiologically based. It seeks to query the notion of identity as fixed, stable or through binaries such as man/women or masculine/feminine. Such categories act as mechanisms of social control by grouping individuals and attaching values to them. Ultimately, both queer theory and feminism seek to transform social norms and relations of power.

The poststructuralism that is embedded in queer theory, and that ‘troubles’ gender essentialism (Butler 1990) can be seen to have its roots in an old feminist maxim – the ‘personal is political’, presented for example in Rowbotham, Segal, and Wainwright (1979). It was enacted through the practice of Consciousness-raising which became well-known through the Women’s Liberation Movement of the 1960s. It involved the sharing of very personal experiences on a range of topics with others in a group. However, with the aim of moving beyond individual or bodily experiences, the Women’s Liberation Movement and feminists alike adopted the motto of ‘the personal is political’ and worked towards raising critical awareness of the economic and social systems that impacted women’s lives and health (Davis 2007, 22). Feminist self-help became a source of political change as Home writes, ‘Consciousness-raising groups sought to assert a main principle of feminism: Personal experience is at the very root of social and political change’ (Home 1991, 232).

From the mid-1980s consciousness-raising groups began to develop into support or self-help groups. Less focused on feminism and addressing sexism, they began to manage complex issues within everyday lives or very specific health problems such as breast cancer and alcoholism (Horne 1999). Importantly, the aim of the self-help group was to create a sense of belonging based on shared experiences, coping strategies and the freedom to discuss taboos (Horne 1999; Adamsen, Rasmussen, and Pedersen 2001). A key component within this is the understanding that group collaborative communication of an individual’s experiences takes the personal beyond the individual to recognise wider societal influences. Rowbotham, Segal, and Wainwright (1979) writing about the ‘personal is political’ at the end of the 1970s tell us that the value of a consciousness-raising group is that an individual’s consciousness is changed when there is a realisation that a common predicament is shared. This is the tenet of many mutual self-help groups. However, consciousness-raising only goes so far. We also have to recognise structural constraints and influences as reflected in the ‘political’ element of the phrase ‘the personal is political’.
Our position is somewhat contradictory in that we draw on the gender binary and at the same time aim to move beyond this. Queer theory allows for this conflicting and slightly at odds approach. Following the work of Butler, we understand gender in terms of a becoming or an activity, ‘as an incessant or repeated action of some sort’ (Butler 1990, 143), which must be recognised by others. We draw on the category of ‘men’ (and women) not as a reality, norm, or fixed identity but instead as a ‘phantasmatic construction, one that has its purposes’ (Butler 1990, 181). In this sense, our study is underpinned by a ‘queer feminism’ (Marinucci 2021) which enables us to query single-sex groupings and what they mean for gender undoing. Before moving to our analysis of our data to find answers to this question we inform the reader about the research design and methodological approach of the GenderEYE study.

**Methodology**

**The GenderEYE study**

The methodology for the study consisted of four elements. Firstly, we conducted a knowledge exchange conference with our Norwegian partners in Trondheim to share good practice in the recruitment and support of male teachers. Secondly, we selected eight case study locations (early years settings) which were recognised as having a keen interest in this area (Southampton, Bristol, London, and the Bradford area). The case studies comprised a 2/3 day visit by the researchers to the setting to conduct observations of staff/child interactions and undertake interviews with managers and staff, both male and female. Thirdly, we undertook interviews with key stakeholders in the early childhood education sector especially those who had already acted as advocates for the recruitment and support of male teachers. Fourthly, we conducted a survey of early childhood education managers and staff to gain a snapshot of current numbers of male employees in the sector and obtain relevant demographic information about them. Analysis of the qualitative data, which this paper mainly draws on, was undertaken through the use of NVivo software according to the model of thematic analysis promoted by Braun and Clarke (2006). A more detailed description of the methodology including the data analytic approach is obtainable from Warin et al. (2020).

**Findings**

**Single-sex support: gender diverse or gender divided?**

Our analysis revealed a number of themes and positions in relation to practices of single-sex support. We found several examples of different types of practices which we have classified together as a range of forms of single-sex support: same-sex buddying arrangements, same-sex peers organised to work together within the same classroom or section of an early years setting, managers focusing on same-sex mentees, single-sex training groups, single-sex support networks. Whilst these practices and strategies are varied, the one principle they share is the recognition that a person of the same sex may be able to give a particular kind of valuable support be that emotional, practical or both. The underlying assumption is gender essentialist in nature. How helpful are these strategies? How far does a single-sex grouping serve to re-entrench the gender divide?
**Single-sex training**

We consider if there is a case for male-only groups in training during the initial phase of teacher preparation. A small number of educational settings in the UK are providing all-male introductory training courses in EYE, after which men can go on to (mixed gender) vocational training. For example, the initiative managed by Glasgow City Council relies on single-sex support by creating an all-male support group for men interested in tasting a career in early childhood education enrolled on a Scottish National Vocational Qualification, level 2 course (see account in Warin 2018). The initial training acts as a taster course but also specifically designed to increase the number of men entering the early years profession. Single-sex training courses were met with a range of responses. For some of the GenderEYE participants, such courses were viewed as ‘strange’, or at odds with equality, as the following individual, a representative from an early years organisation, indicates:

My gut reaction is that it’s a bit of an oddity in a world where we’re trying to get gender equality … [...] to create a false environment for training and then you expose men to a highly female workforce. But I’m really open-minded and if the evidence said, you got them over the initial hurdle, fine. But it just seems a bit of a contradiction, you know.

Single-sex training courses were criticised for creating ‘false environments’ and thus failing to prepare men for the realities they would eventually be working in. They were viewed as ultimately regressive rather than progressive; working against a more equal and fairer society. However, it was not uncommon for participants to consider, alongside the disadvantages of such courses, some of the potentials of such training, presented here as ‘getting over the initial hurdle’. It is important to reflect here on what this initial hurdle might be. The findings of our study indicated that boys in schools did not ‘de-select’ a career in early years because it was considered ‘women’s work’ or ‘too feminine’. In fact, our data suggested that boys did not ‘de-select’ early years because it was either not offered to them or never considered; it was simply not on their career horizons. In this case, the initial hurdle may be a lack of exposure, information and opportunity, which the all-male course appears to provide.

For some professionals, single-sex training also offered a ‘safe space’, as the following participant, a council funding officer, describes:

There needs to be a critical mass of an underrepresented gender. So if there are three girls in a class full of mechanical engineering students, or three boys in a class full of EY students, and one of them drops out, there’s a high chance that the other two will also drop out. So getting this critical mass from the offset is really vital and having an access course that gives them the confidence that, ‘I can do this; this is for me. I don’t mind if I’m the only one but I understand that going in’. It really does seem to give them the confidence that they’re doing the right thing and they’re not being judged.

As the participant describes above, single-sex training for men in the early years places male students in a stronger position to manage some of the challenges they may face at a later stage. They provide opportunities to build confidence, to question whether this is an area they want to work in, and perhaps to share some of the doubts, concerns or anxieties around their precarious position within the early years field. The single-sex training space recognises and acknowledges the vulnerabilities that male students may encounter in their career and provides a safe space that they can fall back on when they encounter difficulties.
The presence of male peers

A key area of discussion within the GenderEYE study relates to the presence of other male practitioners as a form of support in EYE. Of relevance is a finding from our survey which showed that 9.5% of male employees were in settings where there was more than one man. This corroborates a view that is recognised by researchers and practitioners that the existing presence of men can act as a carrot to draw other men. However, this may be more important for men at the early stages of a career in the early years. For very experienced male practitioners, or men that were based in the same nursery for a number of years and had developed strong peer relationship, the presence of other male practitioners was not viewed as important or necessary. In these cases, male practitioners did not feel anxious or concerned about being ‘the only man’ in a setting; more specifically, their sense of being different, or of belonging to a minority was reduced. However, for newly-trained practitioners or those for whom strong peer relationships had not yet formed, the presence of other men offered a valuable route to support as the following participant, (EYE consultant) describes:

In most of our settings I think there’s more than one man. I think in the early days when there was just one man it’s really difficult, especially where you’re already quite aware of society looking slightly askance at you for making that choice. So men definitely do need the support. They need to know they’re not alone, they need to know this is a good, sensible, professional decision.

The presence of other male practitioners appeared to provide support in different ways. It helped to normalise men’s presence in EYE, reducing their ‘hypervisibility’ or sense of being different. It also legitimised men’s career choices by showing that to be male and to want to care for young children was not out of the ordinary.

There are however further and less immediate benefits. With an only man in a setting, there is a greater expectation that he will be the ‘male role model’ (fatherly, leading on rough play, engaging boys) and in order to ‘justify’ or explain his presence in early years, an only male practitioner may often feel compelled to adopt this role (see Brownhill 2014; Wood and Brownhill 2018). With more than one male practitioner, the differences between men become clearer. In one of the settings from the GenderEYE study in which there were two male practitioners, we observed how Peter enjoyed rough and tumble and risk-based activities with the children, and Zayan enjoyed baking and craft. These differences were noted by the female staff, thus enabling the notion of ‘male role’ to become displaced and replaced by ‘different kinds of men’. This provided another source of support as it allowed men to develop their own interests within their early years practice and to move away from stereotypical roles and responsibilities.

There may be further aspects to consider in relation to the intersections of race/ethnicity and gender. It is recognised that the number of black practitioners in EYE is incredibly low (Tembo 2021). The settings from our study were predominantly ‘white’ with the exception of one setting located in the South of England which employed practitioners, managers and apprentices from different racial and ethnic backgrounds. In spite of this diversity, discussions around race and ethnicity were muted in interviews, and discussions on this topic were absent in diversity training. In this setting, a black male apprentice had developed strong mentor and supportive relationships with a black male manager/practitioner and a black female room leader who had taken the apprentice ‘under her wing’ in
the Baby Room. Through interviews with the practitioners, managers and room leaders, and observations of the setting, these relationships emerged as key in the apprentice’s decision to remain in the nursery. This would suggest that for black male early years practitioners, particularly those at the beginning of their career, the presence and support of other black practitioners, regardless of gender, was key to retaining them.

**Buddying and mentoring**

The findings of our study showed that some early years settings strategically created supportive single-sex spaces for male practitioners, such as budding or mentoring. This sometimes took place between practitioners within the same setting (although not always from the same branch) or from different organisations. In one of the settings from the GenderEYE study, budding involved a more experienced male practitioner supporting a male apprentice from a different setting (cross-setting budding) during which the apprentice observed, and sometimes worked alongside the experienced male practitioner.

In this case, mentoring provided key support for a male practitioner at the beginning of his career, identified in the GenderEYE study as a ‘moment of vulnerability’; an area of potential negative impact. For example, on becoming a male practitioner, an apprentice will have to navigate questioning around their choice of career, possibly from colleagues but also family and friends. EYE may be perceived as an inappropriate career choice for men, or it may be viewed as ‘women’s work’ (Crisp and King 2016; Brody et al. 2021). Novice male practitioners may not have developed strong peer support or may be new to a setting. They may be still ‘finding their feet’. Such moments of vulnerability may push men to reflect on and ultimately reconsider their decision to work with young children. Thus, gendered, tailored support in these moments is key to retaining male practitioners and although there were examples in the data of female practitioners providing support through positive working relationships and mentoring, single-sex support can normalise the men’s presence (and struggles) within EYE, and facilitate moving on from the moment of vulnerability.

In addition to mentoring, there were also ‘in-house’ support groups organised by male practitioners themselves or by managers looking to gender diverse their workforces. The thinking behind this strategy replicates the practices of consciousness-raising groups described earlier and represented in the early Women’s Movement, and Men’s Movement. As well as providing support, such groups worked together to find ways to promote EYE as a career for men. Focusing on change beyond their immediate everyday practice recognises and validates men’s decisions to work with young children, suggesting that men not only have a role to play in children’s lives now but also in shaping their future. Key to the development of these supportive spaces is the input from managers and the allocation of resources to the activities.

**Single-Sex support groups and networks**

A further area of single-sex support observed in the Gender study were formal Men in Early Years Networks. These (sometimes) all-male groups met periodically to provide support and guidance to men working in EYE. They also met to discuss issues relating to gender and the workforce, and in some cases, they invited guest speakers and
organised national conferences. A number of such groups exist around England although more recently they have ‘opened up’, inviting mixed genders to take join the group and take part in the activities.

Such groups received mixed responses from men and women working in EYE, from interest and support to disinterest and suspicion. In one early years setting which employed six male practitioners, the local Men in Early Years group was a source of discussion amongst male and female practitioners. It was felt the group had an important role to play, not only to as a source support but also as a backdrop to important discussions on gender within the setting, both for children and staff.

However, other practitioners were more cautious about single-sex support, suggesting that there was no need for such gender divisive practices, as the following female practitioner explains:

I’m intrigued to know what they talk about at those meetings. Are there things that men feel differently in early years from women? I’d be fascinated to know. I don’t feel there would be in this particular setting.

For the participant above, male and female practitioners were viewed as the same in terms of roles; all staff undertook the same tasks. Our observations of male and female practitioners at work in nurseries showed that men and women indeed often worked interchangeably, with each member of the team involved in a range of activities including indoor/outdoor play, intimate care such as nappy changing, cleaning up or preparing food and also comforting children. However, we also observed that gender stereotyping sometimes ‘slipped in’ to EYE, with male practitioners positioned as more suited to ‘rough and tumble’, risk-based play or in some cases, removed from nappy changing responsibilities. We also found that male practitioners faced a different set of challenges from their female counterparts. For example, male practitioners were often concerned about potential allegations of sexual abuse and sensitive to the perceptions of others when cuddling or touching a child. It was also common for parents to request that male staff were not involved in children’s intimate care or as a child’s keyworker. Thus, although male and female practitioners worked ‘as equals’, they also experienced many gendered challenges which rendered specific, tailored support necessary.

All-male support groups were also sometimes viewed as unhelpful because they positioned men as a homogenous group or as a group based on physiological/biological characteristics, as the following male practitioner describes:

I found myself being invited to the local Men in Early Years Network meetings and I found it quite strange that the need for that was felt. I think it’s easy to make assumptions about men as a group ... that men will require certain things for a career. And I think the issue of pay came up quite a lot if I remember rightly. But I guess beyond that I’ve always had a bit of an issue about men being treated as a homogenous group, because all of the men that I met on one of the various Network events were all very different and it was hard to say what we had in common other than the fact that we’re men biologically.

As in the previous example, the male practitioner above questions the need for all-male support groups. He considers that such groups are founded on shared assumptions about men’s needs based on their physiology and thus promote essentialist notions of men and women. He stresses that men may be very different from one another and therefore does not support interventions that treat men as a homogeneous group. For many early years
professionals, single-sex support is a return to biological essentialism, something which male and female practitioners often try to undo by practicing and performing a gender-flexible pedagogy. The concept of ‘gender-flexibility’ as Warin (2018) describes, ‘implies a readiness to be versatile, to switch between performances. It is a creative and very conscious kind of practice which relies on being aware of gender’ (141). Single-sex support appears to work against a gender-flexible pedagogy.

On the whole, the GenderEYE study showed that resistance to gendered support was strong. As mentioned earlier, male and female practitioners were viewed as ‘the same’ in terms of roles and capabilities. Furthermore, the practitioner is viewed as a highly professional role; free from the influence of any gender stereotyping. Therefore, it was considered that support should be the same for all genders. It was also apparent that to provide gendered support was to increase the feeling of being ‘different’, something that male practitioners especially wanted to avoid. However, men and women’s experiences of working in a nursery with young children are sometimes very different and thus gendered support is sometimes key to retaining male practitioners when there are moments of vulnerability.

In one example, a male practitioner describes how he took a group of nursery children on an organised trip to the local park with a male colleague. He was verbally accosted by a woman there who disagreed with the presence of men working in nurseries. The male practitioner was considerably shaken by the incident and was supported by the setting manager who discussed contacting the police. In the following extract, he recounts his thoughts on single-sex support in light of this incident. He says:

So the first time I went to (all male support group) I thought, oh I’m not sure about this, everyone’s telling all these horror stories. I don’t experience this, I feel like I’m wasting someone’s time and space to be here, I’ve got a lovely time. And of course, then I had that incident in the park and I thought, oh my God.. that completely changed my outlook on it so whenever it comes available, I always go.

Initially, the participant rejected the single-sex support group because he found that the discussions did not corroborate with his experiences as a practitioner in an early years setting. Initially, this particular group had been set up as a space for men to share their ‘horror stories’ of experiencing parental mistrust and suspicion and indeed for men experiencing actual allegations of sexual abuse. The group was similar to the one described at the start of this paper. Ultimately, he found listening to the stories frightening and unhelpful. However, the discrimination he suffered in the park altered his perceptions, increasing his sense of vulnerability and making him more aware of some of the challenges faced by men in EYE. The all-male group became helpful because it recognised these challenges; it provides a space for men to voice their concerns and fears, and it provides tailored support and guidance.

During our study, it was often argued however that early settings should be the ones to provide support to their practitioners. Indeed, in some gender-sensitive settings, managers are aware of these issues and do provide support. However, many settings often employ very few, if any, male practitioners and as a result, support strategies within nurseries or early years settings are very much undeveloped or are developed adhoc as the problem progresses. This means that external organisations, which recognise the challenges men face and provide key, tailored advice and guidance, are valuable.
However, it is also argued that there is a case for single-sex support groups beyond that of providing support, as the manager of nursery describes below:

I think men need a space that is not populated by women to talk from a male perspective from early years that in a way isn’t infiltrated by women … just in the same way that I think conscious raising and ‘Take back the night’ should be attended by women and not men. However, there is a paradox in there as well. I’m totally aware of that but for me it’s part of a journey.

Drawing on the example of conscious raising activities, the manager considers the need for a separate space for men within the early years in order to be able to explore the issues that men face in this sector. As with many of the participants in the study, the manager recognises the problematic nature of single-sex groups. However, she acknowledges that men and women experience different inequalities. There is an opportunity to share these in a ‘safe space.’ Importantly, the manager refers to single-sex support as a ‘journey’; they are a temporary space which provide a means to end. Such groups not only support practitioners but also allow them to explore more deeply how inequalities are produced and sustained and to find ways to address these. Ultimately, the demand for single-sex support will decrease as the gender of the early years workforces becomes more diverse.

Conclusions and implications

We draw together the main conclusions from the above set of findings on the value of single-sex support strategies before offering the reader an answer to our debate about how far single-sex strategies operate to entrench gender difference or create a means to the ends – of gender diversification. It is clear that there is an increasing demand for single-sex support amongst some groups. These can make a significant difference to men experiencing insecurity as they cross traditional gender borders (Brody 2014). As EYE is one of the least gender-diverse occupations, men’s journeys through this sector can sometimes be fraught with tensions such as mistrust by parents/carers and colleagues, potential allegations of sexual abuse and discrimination around men’s choice of career and early years practice.

In this paper, we have shown the ways in which different groups have rejected or found value in single-sex support. Our findings show that it not only provides support but also legitimises men’s career choices, gets men in through the door, moves them on from points of vulnerability, creates a critical mass and a safe space. However, single-sex support is not viewed unproblematically within early years. The GenderEYE study shows that it may be experienced by practitioners as both useful and unhelpful; as something men would welcome but which they sometimes fear may reflect negatively on their capabilities. Furthermore, the need for male-to-male support may peak and trough with men needing greater levels of support at the beginning of their career or at a moment of vulnerability such as starting in a new setting or working with a new manager and colleagues. In some cases, managers may not be aware of, or interested in, the challenges facing male staff and they may be unsure how best to support them. As a consequence, single-sex support plugs a gap and provides key areas of support to the male early years workforce. However, greater input from male practitioners about the kinds of support practices that would most benefit them, and those they would wish to avoid, is key here.
Importantly, however, single-sex support must be time limited; part of a journey to somewhere better or as a means to an end, not an end in itself. Single-sex support should feed into everyday early years practice to enable settings to become more aware of the challenges that male practitioners face and to develop strategies to manage these. This would include developing reflexive spaces to explore gender sensitivity within early years teaching and workforces practices; Warin highlights ‘as an element of overall self-awareness, reflectiveness and reflexivity, ECEC [EYE] practitioners, could learn to recognise the subtle and often invisible ways traditional gender norms can persist within the power plays of the school’ (2018, 129). Without such changes, the events that lead to the creation of all-male support go unchallenged and the gender stereotypes around both men and women in EYE remain. In this way, there is a potential for exacerbating binary thinking if not accompanied by ‘moving beyond experience’ and strategies to dismantle discriminatory practices.

In moving beyond the binary, we must also reflect on the ways in which single-sex support closes down opportunities for non-binary groups and experiences such as intersex, trans and meta gender communities, which are underrepresented in EYE. Although in this paper we have focused on all-male support networks, the recruitment of men cannot be the only narrative in the gender diversification of the early years workforce (Mohandas 2021). Furthermore, the increase in public platforms for gender fluidity means that children begin to feel more confident about locating their bodies and identities outside of the male/female binary (Diamond 2020; Horton 2020). Knowledge and understanding of gender diversification through non-binary narratives must begin to take shape.

Do single-sex support groups re-gender or de-gender, a question that relies on the distinction posed by Martino and Rezai-Rashti (2012). There is a risk of re-gendering if single-sex support: focuses on biological characteristics of the group instead of the shared inequalities relating to gender; is viewed as an end in itself rather than part of a journey (towards de-gendering society). We conclude that single-sex support is important and does indeed have a role to play but must be valued as a strategy (one of many) for moving EYE beyond the gender binary. It is a means to an end.

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