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## ***TOWARDS A GENDER NEUTRAL INTERPRETATION OF PROFESSIONALISM IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE (ECEC)***

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***Hacia una interpretación neutral en materia de género del profesionalismo en la educación y el cuidado de la primera infancia (ECEC)***

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### **RESUMEN**

La presencia de los cuidadores y educadores varones en los servicios de educación y atención a la primera infancia es muy escasa prácticamente en todos los países europeos y, a menudo, se encuentra sometida a debate. Tras ofrecer algunos datos al respecto, este artículo describe las recomendaciones y acciones emprendidas desde la Unión Europea para acortar esta brecha entre hombres y mujeres en el trabajo con los niños más pequeños y presenta la actividad llevada a cabo por el Departamento de Estudios sobre Bienestar Social de la Universidad de Gante en la última

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década. En concreto, el texto profundiza en los motivos que subyacen a esta segregación laboral por género y plantea un nuevo profesionalismo neutral en cuanto a género como vía para superarla. El artículo finaliza con una serie de propuestas y recomendaciones que deberían ser consideradas para lograr una situación más igualitaria entre hombres y mujeres en las profesiones vinculadas al cuidado y la educación infantil.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Cuidado y educación de la primera infancia, personal educativo, igualdad de género.

### **ABSTRACT**

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Male childcare workers are quite scarce in Early Childhood Education and Care services in all the European Countries and often are a controversial subject. After offering some data about this issue, the article describes the recommendations and actions undertaken by European Union to reduce the gap between men and women in their work with the youngest children and shows the research of the Centre for Innovation in the Early Years of the Department of Social Welfare Studies (University of Ghent) during the last decade. Specifically, the text describes the reasons below the fact of this gender inequality and proposes a gender neutral interpretation of professionalism as a way to avoid it. The article ends with proposals and recommendations that should be considered to achieve more equality between men and woman in the professions linked to childhood education and care.

**KEY WORDS:** Early Childhood Education and Care, Education personnel, Gender equality.

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### **INTRODUCTION**

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In the autumn of 2010, the Netherlands and Belgium were shaken up by a terrible case of sexual abuse by Robert M. in a day-care centre in Amsterdam. The press has seized upon this as a means of questioning the role of male childcare workers in facilities for young children. Are men truly needed in childcare or do they tend to be more of a risk to the safety of the youngest children? I myself was extremely affected by this abuse of children and the uproar in the press that this caused, because I am involved in actions and research

on men in childcare. Following the articles in the press, I received emails from men I have been working with since 2001. In those emails, they talk about how, for the first time in years, they are again receiving negative responses from parents and friends. Their professional identity was being questioned because it seems that caring young children is not supposed to be something that men do. For many men working in childcare—and in the entire education sector—these have been difficult times. Were the successful actions that were set up in Flanders, (and that we will describe later) and which had increased the number of men in childcare from 0.9% in 2001 to 3.4% in 2010, all in vain?

It is still not yet clear what the long-term effect will be on the number of men opting for a job in the care of young children. This, therefore, seems the right time—following the case of paedophilia in Amsterdam (Robert M. was condemned to 18 years of prison in May)—to take a closer look at the theme of professionalism and gender in the professions for young children.

Why are men needed as professionals in ECEC? The first question we may ask is whether male workers are needed in services for young children. Are women not traditionally more suitable to care for small children? Several researchers and international organizations (such as in February 2011, in a communication from the European Commission) argue for more men in the facilities for young children (nursery school and kindergarten). Here, we will briefly list the arguments cited (PEETERS, EECKHOUT, 2003; EUROPEAN COMMISSION CHILDCARE NETWORK, 1993; OECD, 2006; CAMERON and MOSS, 2007).

Men in services for young children serve as an example for the parents. They show mothers and fathers that childcare is not exclusively a female affair. Young fathers often have a lack of role models and male employees can take on this role (EC CHILDCARE NETWORK, 1993).

Childcare and kindergarten are a women's world, which makes fathers who bring or fetch their children often feel uncomfortable. Male childcare workers approach a father more easily and can provide an important contribution to making services for young children more father-friendly (PEETERS and EECKHOUT, 2003).

A mixed team offers men and women the chance to learn from each other. Men and women differ in their approach to children and parents. We know from research that this diversity of approach and communication is an

enrichment for the functioning of the facilities. Male childcare workers have their own style in caring for young children and, because of this; the children are offered a greater range of opportunities, which, in turn, expands their space for social experimentation.

A mixed team in the provisions for young children (ECEC) has the potential to contribute to a new culture in childcare, with men and women dividing the tasks evenly between them. This is an important step towards equal opportunities for men and women, in which the future generation will also be involved. Many experts assume that, in this way, the future generations would be more likely to divide household chores and caring for children proportionately between the two sexes (EUROPEAN COMMISSION NETWORK ON CHILDCARE, 1993).

A final important argument is that, in these times of an aging population, there is a great need for manpower in the care sector and that it will be difficult to meet this demand in the labor market if we rely only on women. It is, moreover, also the case that the women who retire from the labor market are mainly low qualified, while the young women who enter the labor market tend to be more highly educated. This means that, in the future, it will be difficult to find exclusively female low-schooled candidates to fill the jobs in childcare (OECD, 2006; CAMERON and MOSS, 2007).

## **1. THE CONNECTION BETWEEN PROFESSIONALISM AND GENDER IN ECEC PROFESSIONS**

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Cameron has studied the relationship between the professionalization of the childcare professions and the participation of the male staff members (CAMERON, 2006). She found that, in most European countries, there was a tendency towards increased professionalization: 'In England this shift is taking place both at the policy level, with the aim of addressing goals such as improving the social and educational outcomes for children and increasing the availability and accessibility of early childhood services, and at the sector level, with increased identification with the notion of being a 'professional' (CAMERON, 2006: 69). In some countries, the tendency towards professionalization has become even clearer due to the development of a model of professionalism in which there is one core professional who is

highly qualified (bachelor's or master's degree). This is the case in Denmark, Sweden and New Zealand for all facilities for children between the ages of 0 and 5 (MOSS, 2004) and in Belgium and France for kindergarten (2.5-5-year olds). Cameron states that, in these countries, «professionalization in terms of extensive training, a unique body of knowledge and a distinctive occupational identity was achieved with an almost entirely female workforce, and before efforts were made to recruit more men» (CAMERON, 2006: 71). A high degree of professionalism does not apparently automatically lead to an increase in the number of male staff members. «A process of professionalization is not necessarily related to increased numbers of men working in early childhood services: both processes can clearly occur independently of one another» (CAMERON, 2006: 76).

One example of this is New Zealand where all staff members who work with children from 0 to 6 years old must have a bachelor's degree in the near future and where only 1% of the teachers are men (FARQUHAR, 2006).

However, we have also seen that there are countries where it appears to be possible to attract more men, without there being a high degree of professionalization. In Scotland, where 40% of the childcare workers have not achieved level 2 (MILLER, 2006: 3), excellent results have, nonetheless, been achieved in attracting male staff members. The 'Men in Childcare' project in Scotland has succeeded in motivating around 1.500 men to take some form of —generally low-school— training and mid 2012 4% of the workforce was male (SPENCE, 2012).

But then again, there is certainly a relationship between the professionalism of the childcare professions and the attractiveness of these professions for men. Men will only be attracted to jobs in the childcare sector if these jobs emanate a professionalism that is not gender-bound, in other words, that is not based on the maternal role (PEETERS, 2005; CAMERON, MOSS and OWEN, 1999). Cameron (2006: 76) states —base on her research with male staff members (CAMERON, MOSS and OWEN, 1999)— that professionalism that is based on 'mother-like practice' is an impediment for the entry of male staff in ECEC. In connection with this, Cameron talks about «dislodging the gendered model of the profession» (CAMERON, 2006: 76).

We must redefine the professional identity and the status of the ECEC professions. A study of the gender aspects in the professions dealing with

young children could contribute to the ‘democratic professionalism’ as was defined by Oberhuemer: «Democratic professionalism presupposes an awareness of multiple ways of knowing, an understanding that knowledge is in fact contestable. It requires a willingness and ability to reflect on one’s own taken-for-granted beliefs» (OBERHUEMER, 2005: 14). In Cameron’s opinion, the experiences of male staff members may be able to broaden the collective knowledge base of the profession.

By continually questioning the gender-specific aspects in the tradition of the reflective practitioner (SCHÖN, 1983), a new interpretation can be given to the practice of the childcare professions.

Although professionalism in the childcare professions and the entry of men into the profession are not necessarily linked with each other, the type of professionalism is certainly important: a gender-specific interpretation of professionalism will certainly curb the entry of men, while a gender-neutral structure of professionalism will promote it. In the following section, we will analyse the evolution of the thinking about a gender-neutral professionalism, and we will underpin the proposition that a gender-neutral interpretation is essential in order to make the ECEC sector better disposed towards men.

The influx of the necessary employees in the future can also be hypothecated by the extreme gender segregation in the sector. Women are becoming increasingly better educated and will, therefore, make other professional choices in the future. Various authors warn that it is less evident now that women will choose to go into the care professions. The safeguarding of a sufficient influx in childcare therefore demands -alongside of better training and status in the profession- that the gender segregation is breached, so that men will also start choosing jobs in the ECEC sector (CAMERON and MOSS, 2007).

## **2. THE INSPIRING WORK OF THE CHILDCARE NETWORK OF THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION ON THE GENDER THEME IN ECEC**

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In 1982, the European Union started the first ‘Gender Equality Program’ with the intention of offering women equal chances in the labour market.

Within this framework, in 1986, the Childcare Network of the European Commission was established under the chairmanship of Prof. Peter Moss of London University.

One of the three action items of this Network was the theme 'Men as caregivers'. From a gender-equality perspective, men should take on more tasks within the family and should become more involved in the parenting of young children.

The theme 'Men as caregivers' also came up in the 'Recommendations on Childcare' of the Council of Ministers of the EU (1992); «Member States commit themselves to promote and encourage, with due respect for freedom of the individual, increased participation by men» (Article 6).

In 1993, the Childcare Network invited experts from various European Member States to Ravenna in order to take part in a debate on men as caregivers. The experts agreed that the measures to involve more men in the parenting of their young children would have little effect unless a greater number of male caregivers were employed in the childcare sector (EC CHILDCARE NETWORK, 1993). Male staff members could serve as role models for young fathers and, at the same time, services for young children could play an important part in the development of a new care culture for young children: a culture in which there is also a place for men. Another important argument for employing more men in the provisions for young children was the fact that children would then be confronted with male role models. The Network assumed that this would have an effect on future generations, who would then be more inclined to divide the household and parenting tasks more equally among men and women.

The experts found, however, that, within the EU, there were only a limited number of centres where male staff members formed a significant percentage of the personnel. In most of the European countries, the men made up no more than 1 to 3% of the employees. The Childcare Network, therefore, decided that serious efforts should be made to increase the number of men in the provisions for young children.

In 1995, on commission from the Childcare Network of the European Commission, Fred Deven, a member of the Childcare Network, did a study of the number of men employed in childcare in Flanders. Of the 14,560 people who then worked in the Flemish childcare sector (0 to 3 years old), there were,

all told, 81 men. This comes to 0.55% or one man to 200 women. He differentiated between childcare in facilities (day-care centres) where 1.5% of the staff were men, and the family day care sector that was apparently almost exclusively the terrain of women (0.1%). The city of Barcelona was not doing a bad job, with 4%. Sweden had 3% for the 0 to 6-year old group and, in Finland, 4% worked with the age group 0 to 7. In the United Kingdom, ECEC was the most gender-segregated profession with only 2% for the 0 to 6-year olds. (JENSEN, 1998: 126).

In the Scandinavian countries in the early 1990s, various initiatives were taken and campaigns were launched in order to increase the number of male staff members in services for young children (0 to 6 years old). In Denmark, the theme was put on the political agenda in the early 1990s and good results were achieved: 5% male staff members in childcare centres (0 to 3 years old), 9% for the age group 3 to 6 years old and in the mixed age groups (1 to 12 years old) and 25% in out-of-school care.

The Sheffield Children's Centre in the UK has had an equal number of male and female caregivers since the 1980s (MELEADY and BROADHEAD, 2002) and the Pen Green Family Centre also had nearly as many men as women employed there. At the beginning of the 1990s, a new kind of professionalism was established in these two centres, such that since then, the gender differences have been openly discussed and a gender-neutral interpretation of professionalism has been constructed (CAMERON, MOSS and OWEN, 1999; MELEADY and BROADHEAD, 2002). ECEC workers from both of these centres, researchers and policy makers from Emilia Romagna, (Italy), Norway, Sweden and Denmark formed a group of pioneers who worked closely with the Childcare Network (JENSEN, 1998: 128).

Meanwhile, the Network had published the discussion document 'Quality in Provisions for Young Children' that was translated into all the languages of the EU-12. The theme of male childcare workers was one of the topics in this brochure, about which a discussion was started among researchers, policy makers and representatives of childcare workers within the Member States.

In 1995, the Childcare Network of the European Commission published a report 'Forty Quality Targets in services for young children' in which the discussions that had been carried out within the EU-12 were summarized



into 40 objectives for quality that the Member States would have to achieve within the following 10 years. Objective 29 of this document states that 20% of the childcare workers should be men.

The activities of the Childcare Network were terminated in 1996. It is undoubtedly to the credit of the Network that it succeeded in putting the gender theme on the agenda of the EU Member States. Thanks to the work of this Network, European funding was made available to undertake actions to make provisions for young children in Europe more male-friendly. The European Social Fund, in particular, has financed numerous projects in various European countries in order to bring the gender balance in the facilities into equilibrium and in which the aim was to provide a gender-neutral structure of professionalism in the professions dealing with young children.

### **3. TEN YEARS OF ACTION-RESEARCH IN THE FLEMISH COMMUNITY OF BELGIUM ON ‘PROFESSIONALISM AND GENDER (2002-2012)’**

Inspired by the work of the European Childcare Network, the Centre for Innovation in the Early Years of the Department of Social Welfare Studies (University of Ghent) started research on ‘Professionalism and Gender in ECE’ in 2002 and is still continuing (VANDENBROECK and PEETERS, 2008). In 2002 with the support of the European Social Fund a campaign to get more men into childcare (0 to 3 and out of school) was set up in collaboration with two Ministers: the Minister of Welfare and the Minister of Employment. The actions to increase the number of men in childcare were supported by a series of research on gender and professionalism (for an overview of these studies see VANDENBROECK and PEETERS, 2008). So far, five areas have been studied: the profile of males working with the under three age group and in out-of-school care centres (PEETERS 2003; 2005); the drop-out rate of male students during an initial training course (VAN NUFFEL and VANDENBROECK, 2004); the profile of students in the initial vocational training course and in the adult education training course (both at upper secondary level) (MANNAERT, 2006; VANDENHEEDE, 2006) and in the new bachelor training in the University colleges of Brussels,

Ghent and Antwerp (SIX and CORNETTE, 2012); gender bias in the manuals of three vocational training schools Childcare (VEREECKE, 2006); and the role that centres for career guidance play in reinforcing gender segregation in the childcare profession (VAN RUMSTE and VAN STEENBERGHE, 2010; SCHANDLER, 2010). This group of studies on Gender and Professionalism gave also an insight in the origins of the extreme gender segregation in the ECEC sector (PEETERS, 2007).

#### **4. ORIGINS OF GENDER SEGREGATION IN THE PROVISIONS FOR YOUNG CHILDREN**

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The literature review that was carried out in the different studies on ‘Gender and Professionalism’ indicates that childcare —and, also, kindergarten— is an explicitly female profession in all countries. In all the professions dealing with children, women are in the majority and the degree of gender segregation is in direct relation to the age of the children: the younger the children, the higher the percentage of women (MOSS, 2003).

Over the past few years, various authors have tried to find an answer to the question of why so few men work in the ECEC professions. Below, we have listed the reasons.

##### **4.1. Childcare is seen as woman’s work**

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The primary reason for the great majority of women in the professions concerning young children can be found, according to various authors, in the fact that childcare is seen as ‘women’s work’ (CAMERON, MOSS and OWEN, 1999; CAMERON, 2001: 449; FARQUHAR, 2006: 5). Childcare is seen as a replacement for the mother’s role. Cameron, Moss and Owen use the concept of ‘gender:’ the various characteristics and skills that are ascribed by a culture to men and women. Gender differentiates itself from sex which refers solely to the biological differences between men and women. Gender and sex are strongly linked to each other by the fact that the biologically-determined sex will define which gender role (masculine or feminine) society expects a person to play (PEETERS, 2007). Because it is all about a social construction, gender is strongly susceptible to change: the differences

between men and women will vary according to place, culture, ethnicity and class. Gender would, according to Cameron, Moss and Owen (1999) be unconsciously imbedded in the construction of professionalism for occupations dealing with young children. Caring for children —paid or unpaid— is experienced as women's work, something that women, by nature, do better. This gender mechanism operates on two levels. At the individual level, the childcare staff members bring, via their own gender identity, specific opinions as to how professionalism in the ECEC sector must be interpreted: the role, tasks and behaviours of men and women in the specific context of the work in ECEC. The gender component also plays a role in the institutional sphere: it has its impact on the historical origin of ECEC and on the manner in which childcare and kindergarten is organised (the professionalism of the organisation). The gender aspect has, therefore, also been a determining factor in the policy of the government and the educational practices of the organised childcare facilities (professionalism of the activities). Childcare is, after all, inspired by a certain kind of care, namely maternal care. This is, according to various authors, the primary reason for the extremely limited number of men in the childcare sector (CAMERON, MOSS and OWEN, 1999: 8; CAMERON, 2001: 449; PEETERS, 2005; FARQUHAR, 2006: 5).

#### **4.2. Historic connection with the women's movement**

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Moreover, childcare has always been an important item within the feminist movement (DESMET, et al., 1978; POT, 1981; FARQUHAR, 2006: 5). «Early childhood services have always been promoted by women, used by women and worked in by women» (FARQUHAR, 2006: 3). The women's emancipation movement has, in many industrialized countries, had an important impact on the increase of professionalism in childcare, as well as on the increase of the salaries. Up until the end of the 1980s, childcare was strongly linked with the women's movement which, on the one hand, aimed to give women the chance to work outside the home by providing more childcare but, on the other hand, also wanted to employ women in that sector (FARQUHAR, 2006). This solidarity with the feminist movement is given by Farquhar as one of the reasons why practically no men have followed the path into the childcare sector.

### **4.3. Women's professions are not attractive for men**

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Women are attracted to men's professions because they have a great deal to offer: more prestige, better salaries and more extensive career possibilities, but men who chose the traditional women's professions have less to gain and must generally make large sacrifices with respect to salary and status. «Men in non-traditional occupations have less to gain and much to lose: sacrifice in terms of pay and status, as well as raising questions on masculinity and suitability for the job» (SIMPSON, 2005: 364). Farquhar phrased it even more sharply: «Men who enter paid childcare work are often thought of as men who are not 'real' men or gay» (FARQUHAR, 2006: 6). The link between homosexuality and the choice for a profession in childcare has not yet been studied. Simpson has done this for other typically female professions. From Simpson's study, it appears that homosexual men have fewer problems holding their own in typically female professions and that they have fewer identity problems than heterosexual men when working in a primarily female environment (SIMPSON, 2005: 377).

Salary and working conditions play an important role, but are still not the most important reasons. In countries with a high degree of professionalization, such as New Zealand, Sweden (FARQUHAR, 2006; CAMERON, 2006) and also in the Flemish kindergarten –where salaries are equal to those in elementary and secondary education– we still see that the employment rate of men is extremely low: in 1992 the number of men working in Flemish Kindergarten and in childcare were nearly the same: 1% (KLASSE, 1992).

### **4.4. Gender segregation reproduces itself**

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An additional reason why the childcare sector is so gender-segregated lies in the fact that a sector that is so strongly dominated by women reproduces the gender segregation via the policy, the image of the profession, the training courses, the selection and the type of professionalism developed (ROLFE, 2005). If we want to have a more gender-neutral form of professionalism, then action must be undertaken on all of these different levels. 'What needs to be more thoroughly examined is how curricula, organization and promotion of training for care work act as a gendered

deterrent or stimulus, addressing the question of whether men are being implicitly kept out of care work» (CAMERON and MOSS, 2007: 119)

#### **4.5. Fear of being accused of being a paedophile: men must be more careful than women**

Fear of being accused of sexual abuse plays a role, in particular, in the Anglo-Saxon countries (ROLFE, 2005: 27). «All women are perceived to be safe to work with young children whereas any man is considered suspect if he goes for this type of work» (FARQUHAR, 2006: 6). The fear of being accused of sexual abuse is, in a number of countries—including New Zealand—the reason why men are discouraged from choosing a job that involves young children. Farquhar explained the connection between paedophile scandals and the absence of men. In New Zealand, in the 1990s, the percentage of men dropped from 2 to 1% after a case of sexual abuse that was extensively publicized in the gutter press (FARQUHAR, 2006). A study by the Day Care Trust in the UK brought to light that 57% of the group of adults questioned reported that the risk of paedophilia was a barrier to hiring more men for the childcare professions (ROLFE, 2005: 14).

In Anglo-Saxon countries the tabloids go into a feeding frenzy against men in the education sector after each case of paedophilia in the services for children. In this vein, the Daily Mail wrote, after a paedophilia scandal in London in 2011 (10<sup>th</sup> of June), that male childcare workers should not be allowed to change the diapers of young children. And in New Zealand, the number of men in childcare dropped from 2 to 1% after a case of sexual abuse in the nineties was discussed extensively in the tabloids (FARQUHAR, 2006). In Denmark, and also in Flanders, the fear of being unjustly accused of abuse is much less alive (JENSEN, 1998; PEETERS, 2003).

From a British study done in 1999 (CAMERON and MOSS, 1999), we know that male caregivers find it more difficult to be accepted by parents and colleagues and they must also be constantly alert for complaints of pedophilia. Studies in Flanders (VANDENBROECK and PEETERS, 2008; CORNETTE and SIX, 2012) showed that men in childcare are generally well received by the vast majority of parents. The other parents had some initial reservations but also later proved to respond positively. In particular, for

immigrant parents, the arrival of a male childcare worker proved to be more difficult; they needed more time to get used to the male staff member, but eventually their reluctance also disappeared.

But nonetheless, Flemish male childcare workers also report cases in which they are not trusted (VANDENBROECK and PEETERS, 2008). Thus, a mother doubted if the certified male childcare worker could take the temperature of her sick child. Another man who worked with immigrant children said that he purposely worked with the older children (9 to 12 years old) because the immigrant parents find it very strange that a man would care for the youngest children.

The men interviewed (with the exception of one) have not yet encountered preconceptions concerning sexual abuse, but around 20% of them say that they are cautious or reticent. They feel that they must be more wary. The parents seem to experience some touches or hugs from female staff members as normal and even nice, but if a male employee does the same thing one finds it suspicious.

According to a male childcare worker: «Since the Dutroux affair (a psychopath who abused and murdered several children end of the nineties), I was afraid of the reactions of parents, afraid that they would consider me to be a pedophile. As a man, you always have to watch yourself when it comes to physical contact with the children. Take that little two-year old boy in my group who cannot yet walk well; I want to pick him up and give him a kiss, but I have to stop and ask myself if I should do that. Will the parents and colleagues get the wrong idea about me?» (PEETERS and VANDENBROECK, 2008:709)

This also comes up in interviews with men in training. The distrust from the environment has a clear impact on their behavior and that they find regrettable. Young men who are now comfortable in their jobs are also apprehensive about the future. As one man puts it: «When I get older, in my forties or beyond, I will have to look for another job because I feel that people do not accept an older man working with young children. It's unfortunate, but it is true».

Here is one clear example of how certain behaviors are accepted from women and labeled as suspicious from men (PEETERS, 2012). A trainee from the course, whose mother had been a child-minder for decades, always

saw that his mother, after she had changed and washed the little boys, blew on their penises. The baby laughs because he apparently likes this. During his internship, the young man does the same thing and he is reprimanded for this by his mentor. The young man did not think this was anything at all; his mother had been doing this throughout her career and the parents have never complained. When the young man is caught again with the same behavior, it is passed onto the school and there is an interview with the board who considers refusing to grant the young man his diploma because of this 'dangerous' behavior.' Ultimately, after a thorough screening by the school, the young man does receive his diploma. However, the lesson is clear; what his mother did for years without ever having any problems almost cost him his diploma.

## **5. DISCUSSION: WORKING TOWARDS A GENDER-NEUTRAL CONCEPT OF PROFESSIONALISM**

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If we want to achieve a gender-neutral concept of professionalism in working with young children, then we must rethink the structure of professionalism and it must be uncoupled from the mother-replacement concept (CAMERON, MOSS and OWEN, 1999: 25). A professionalism that originates from the replacement of the mother is based on a single stereotype classical gender identity. The classic gender identities are constructed on the basis of differences. They are based on the labelling of the other as different, and employ, therefore, the concept of exclusion: 'a man is different than a woman' (EC NETWORK ON CHILDCARE, 1993).

In order to avoid this exclusion, a model of professionalism must be constructed that is based on 'multiplicity of gendered identities' (CAMERON, MOSS and OWEN, 1999: 20). VANDENBROECK (2001) translates it as 'multiple identity:' we must do away with a structure of professionalism that is based on one identity (be it gender, culture or ethnicity). There are various visions, various ways of working that are used by various people and that are all valuable and that can, therefore also be verified. Every interpretation of professionalism must be continually questioned and made transparent through dialogue and debate. More detachment is not the solution.

Although, the Flemish studies, determine that male childcare workers feel well accepted when compared with their English colleagues who encountered much more resistance, the research results indicate that men are more careful with physical contact and expressions of emotion towards children. There is a danger that, because of the safety of children and fear of discrimination, the decision will be made to minimize physical contact and the expression of emotions between counselors and children as much as possible. Proponents of such a ‘detached approach’ often refer to what is called a professional attitude in other professions. The medical and legal professions assume that the professional will keep a certain distance and not become personally involved with his/her client. In ECEC professions, as well, some employees feel that this is appropriate. One British researcher, MANNING-MORTON (2006), articulates this interpretation of professionalism as follows: «Becoming too involved with the children is not professional».

However, several studies on professionalism in occupations with young children show that this particular interpretation of professionalism is not desirable for ECEC (CALDER, 2008; MOYLES, 2001; PEETERS, 2008).

Towards a ‘warm’ professional that possess the competences to gears his /her own feelings to what is good for the child and the parents.

Someone who works with young children cannot be aloof and distant; he or she must, on the contrary, be emotionally involved with the child and the parents: «It is impossible to work with very young children effectively without a commitment to these children that you could describe as ‘passionate’» (MOYLES, 2001: 81). But at the same time, there are also inherent dangers in this emotional and physical approach. The childcare worker must not allow him/herself to be guided by his/her own emotions. The childcare worker or kindergarten teacher must gear his/her approach (kind words, hugs, comforting) to what is good for the child; it must not be a function of his/her own feelings (PEETERS, 2011). Hochschild puts it this way: «Emotional labour entails learning to manage one’s own feelings in order to evoke particular feelings in other people» (HOCHSCHILD, 1983: 6-7).

Various authors (PRICE, 2001; COLLEY, 2006) have stressed the importance of the ability to use emotions in dealing with children. If the answer to the pedophilia scandals were to be that the childcare and kindergarten educators now opt for a policy of detachment —coolness in



dealing with children— then this entails serious risks. French authors warn that this could lead to a certain dehumanization —«*une certaine deshumanisation*»— (BOSSE-PLATIÈRE *et al.*, 1995). My own research shows that this distance —this non-personal involvement of the professionals with regard to the parent and the young child— evokes a great deal of opposition in parents and I have therefore made a plea for a ‘warm’ professional (PEETERS, 2008), because raising young children should be based on a very high level of emotional involvement.

Dalli advocates integrating the concepts of love and care «into a new construction of professionalism». She recommends giving a new interpretation to this definition of ‘loving children’. She recognizes the problematic definition of these concepts, yet numerous studies show that, for employees in services for young children, «liking or loving children» is one of the most satisfying aspects of their work experience (DALLI, 2006). By interpreting the concepts of ‘love and care differently, the status quo -which primarily deters especially the childcare sector from developing a professional status- can be breached. At the same time, an important aspect of the work with young children that has, thus far, barely been addressed at all, could then come to the forefront. In the educational arena, it would have the advantage that the ‘care competences’ would no longer be seen as personality traits (of women) but as a set of competencies that can be learned in training courses.

## **6. CONCLUSION: CONDITIONS FOR GENDER NEUTRAL PROFESSIONALISM**

In order to be able to realize a gender neutral concept of professionalism, the climate in the training courses and the facilities must change. «This revealing of the childcare workplace as a ‘gendered’ institution employing gendered discourses could envisage a different early childhood professional, one doing complex work in a modern and uncertain world where meanings are continually negotiated between children and adults and among adults» (CAMERON, 2006: 77). The presence of male staff members and the active involvement of fathers in the facilities are essential conditions for achieving a gender neutral structure of professionalism. A gender neutral professionalism

can, after all, only develop through critical reflection and discussion between the male and the female staff members and with the fathers and mothers.

Initiatives to attract more male staff members must, therefore, be encouraged but will, in the near future, not produce any spectacular results because qualified male childcare workers are simply not available on the labour market (ROLFE, 2005: 3). It is, therefore, exceedingly important to develop the initial training courses based on a gender neutral professionalism and to focus actions on training courses that lead to professions in ECEC.

An important role is reserved here for the centres that concentrate on choice of studies and vocational guidance. Men, in particular, who are dissatisfied with their current jobs (rethought career) and had been active in the past in child work (youth movement, sports arts), should be alerted to opportunities offered by adult education (PEETERS, 2005; CREMERS and KRABEL, 2010).

Moreover, action must be taken to better counsel male adolescents in their study choices. In particular, those who are interested in working with children and young people should be brought into contact, via job fairs, with male childcare workers who can point out the creative opportunities of a job with children (ROLFE, 2005). ‘Men-only’ orientation courses have proven to be successful in bringing men to the initial training courses (Spence, 2012). The ‘Men in Childcare’ project in Scotland has, via this men-only orientation course, already raised the number of men up to 4%.

Networks of male students and ECEC staff members, which already exist in Ireland, Norway, Scotland and New Zealand —among other places— are important in convincing young men to enter a training course or to prevent the men who have taken the step to train as ECEC workers —or who already work in childcare— from dropping out. Via chat forums on the internet, these networks can reach isolated male students and ECEC workers. Research has shown, moreover, that they are extremely popular among the users (MANNAERT, 2006; VANDENHEEDE, 2006).

The training courses for the childcare professions must be integrated in the training institutes where both ‘typically male’ —generally technical— and ‘typically female’ professions are taught (VANDENHEEDE, 2006). Schools must actively recruit male teachers and training supervisors. Male students should preferably be supervised by male supervisors or mentors.

The study by Vereecke (2006) demonstrated that, in the Childcare training course, there is —at least in Flanders— a hidden curriculum. The teaching materials reflect a ‘feminine’ professionalism. A screening for the gender neutrality of the course material that is used in the training courses appears to be essential in order to avoid this ‘gender bias’ as much as possible and to achieve a gender neutral interpretation of the courses.

Professionalism in the childcare professions should be given a broader interpretation. In countries such as Norway and Denmark, where a great deal of emphasis is placed on outdoor activities and sports, we find that a different type of professionalism is created that is gender neutral and, therefore, more attractive for male staff members and fathers (WOHLGEMUTH, 2003; HAUGLUND, 2005). Also, a structure of professionalism in which the social function of childcare has been strongly developed (VANDENBROECK, 2009) offers the opportunity to attract more men (MELEADY and BROADHEAD, 2002).

The ECEC facilities and schools must adapt the infrastructure and the working conditions to the male staff members and male students who are doing internships (no aprons, higher changing tables, toilet facilities) (MANNAERT, 2006; VANDENHEEDE, 2006).

The offer of part-time jobs is a clear pull factor in the employment of men in jobs in childcare (ROLFE, 2005; PEETERS, 2005). In the sectors such as out-of-school care, where there is a great deal of part-time work, one could look for a combination with other jobs so that full-time employment could be realized.

The studies in Flanders were supported by a media campaign, and moreover, were managed by a broad group of stakeholders, have had a clear impact on the sector. In 2002, there were 193 men employed in the sector (1.16%), and by January 2010, that number had risen to 875 or 3.4%. This is a far cry from what the Childcare Network of the European Commission had hoped for in 1996: that by 2006 20% of the personnel would be male. However, there is no country that has achieved this percentage. In most countries the proportion of male staff working in childcare comprises only 1 or 2% of the total; therefore Flanders, with its 3.4%, achieves a good score.

From the experiences in the Scandinavian countries, like Norway who is the frontrunner with 8.3% (ROYAL NORWEGIAN MINISTRY, 2012), it

is clear that actions to employ more men in the provisions for young children are only effective if they step in at all levels, and then over a long period of time. In order to bring more equilibrium into the gender balance, the political will is necessary to make this theme a policy priority for at least 10 years (MOSS, 2003c; CREMERS and KRABEL, 2010). Governmental support of all kinds of actions and campaigns is, according to Moss, an important stipulation for success. In their policy documents, the government should continually mention the importance of the presence of men in the provisions for young children.

And last but not least for the men in this sector, this description of the competencies of the 'warm' professional one that is emotionally involved in the work with children and parents could provide a foothold; it would be clearer what kind of physical contact is acceptable and necessary in the care of young children. Furthermore, there would also be a framework for the behaviour of men and women regarding the expression of emotions and physical contact in their work with young children (PEETERS, 2012). For, it is certainly not acceptable that a certain behaviour by a female employee is perceived as sweet and warm while, if a man does the same thing, he is suspect.

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## **PROFESIOGRAFÍA**

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