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Creating a System That Cares: A PRISMA Review and Road Map to Increase Men's Representation in Early Childhood Education and Care

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Careers in early childhood education and care (ECEC) are stereotypically perceived as the work of women, and men less often pursue them. Consequently, men are highly underrepresented in child care work worldwide, and when men work in ECEC, they are often treated as “other”—different from the feminine default. Yet, increasing men's representation in ECEC would bring various benefits such as reducing the rigidity of gender roles across society, addressing labor shortages, and increasing job opportunities for men. Following the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines, we reviewed 120 qualitative, quantitative, and theory articles on redressing the issue of men's underrepresentation in ECEC from 2003 to 2023 to develop a theory-based road map of strategies to foster men's greater inclusion in these careers. Our review identifies key areas for systemic change in organizations, which educate and care for young children, and describes how action is required to professionalize child care, engage gatekeepers, and foster caring masculinities. Further, it highlights relevant issues to be aware of when designing interventions in this specific context, such as the valuing of “women's work,” the importance of intersectional approaches, and the critical evaluation of intervention methods. To sustainably increase gender diversity in ECEC, our road map identifies actors that have the most influence and describes how efforts need to come from government, policymakers, organizational leaders, and broader society.

Public Significance Statement

Men are widely underrepresented in early childhood education and care, a trend that perpetuates gender stereotypes and limits gender equality efforts. This review identifies key areas for systematic change to increase men's representation in early childhood education and care, such as acknowledging the systematic nature of occupational gender segregation, reshaping gendered expectations and roles of men, reducing men's perceived incongruity with early childhood education and care, fostering caring masculinities in childhood, and engaging organizational gatekeepers.


Keywords: child care work, early childhood education and care, evidence-based strategic road map, men in communal roles, role incongruity

Women and men are unequally distributed across different occupations. In industrialized countries, for example, men make up less than 4% of early childhood educators and women 28% of board members in the largest publicly listed companies (Organisation for Economic Co-Operation & Development, 2020, 2021). Yet,

occupational gender segregation is known to hinder the inclusion of talented people, curtail economic growth, and thwart the achievement of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (World Economic Forum, 2020). In recent decades, women have been encouraged to enter traditionally male-dominated professions such as science, technology,

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engineering, and mathematics, and corresponding benefits for increased innovation and greater social responsibility have been widely acknowledged (Galinsky et al., 2015). However, there has not been a comparative push for an increase in men's participation in traditionally women-dominated professions—such as in early childhood education and care (ECEC)—and public support for this endeavor is limited (Block et al., 2018). In an examination of this lack of support, people tended to ascribe lower social value to care-oriented careers when they personally valued communal qualities less, which then negatively impacted the perceived social value of care-oriented careers (Block et al., 2018).

To develop a theory-based road map of potential solutions to address men's underrepresentation in the education and care of children before they reach school age, we reviewed 120 articles published between 2003 and 2023, using the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA; Page et al., 2021). In this review, we examined social constructions of gender and reflected on the impact of gender stereotypes, allowing for greater diversity, not only in terms of gender but gender expression in ECEC. By doing so, we seek to highlight the systemic issue of the devaluation of women's work in ECEC and suggest that increasing the sustainable representation of men, and gender diversity more broadly, does not necessarily require—and should seek to avoid—the remasculinization of ECEC.

In striving for gender equality, it is easy to ignore the cultural or social contexts organizations find themselves in. The understanding of ECEC professions as women's work is rooted in historical gendered divisions of labor (Ejuu, 2016; Martino, 2008). This association of ECEC with femininity over time has resulted in the devaluation of women's work (Block et al., 2018; Puzio & Valshtein, 2022), as women are perceived as of lower status than men and, accordingly, communion is valued less than agency (Conway et al., 1996; Ridgeway et al., 2009; Schmader et al., 2001). To encourage men's engagement in ECEC and increase gender diversity in care-oriented careers, there needs to be a cultural shift in the way we perceive “the work of women” and caring roles. During the COVID-19 pandemic, ECEC workers were considered essential, as they took care of other essential workers' children (Ceciliano, 2020). As such, it exposed the fundamental need for care work and the greater need to value communal roles in society (Bahn et al., 2020). However, occupational gender segregation increases the devaluation of women's work, relative to work with a lower representation of women and relative to men who do work in women-dominated professions (Cohen & Huffman, 2003). In implementing interventions, steps need to be taken to reduce occupational gender segregation in ECEC, with a focus on valuing women's work and generally increasing the social value of care-oriented careers.

Sustainable representation and inclusion of men in ECEC would provide numerous advantages for men, children, women, and society at large. First, it potentially fosters alternatives to traditional masculinities, which are defined by stoicism, aggression, achievement, and autonomy, as well as dominance and avoidance of femininity (Brannon, 1976; Jansz, 2000; Levant & Richmond, 2007). Traditional masculinities are known to have negative repercussions for health (Coleman, 2015; Neilson et al., 2020), whereas the pursuit of communal goals such as caring for others can benefit interpersonal relationships (see meta-analysis by Le et al., 2013) and may even increase overall life satisfaction (see review by

Meeussen et al., 2020). Further, men who make greater communal contributions, such as when caring for their children, experience improved mental and physical health, life expectancy, social and familial connections, and less violence (Croft et al., 2015; Elliott, 2016; Knoester et al., 2007).

Moreover, men's greater participation in ECEC has the potential to address labor shortages. For instance, 84% of early childhood facilities surveyed in the United Kingdom reported having difficulty recruiting and retaining early childhood educators (Early Years Alliance, 2021). Labor shortages in ECEC have been suggested as a potential catalyst for changing gendered expectations of educators and encouraging and supporting men's engagement in the field (Farquhar, 2008). As such, a greater number of male educators would increase the available pool of workers and mitigate labor shortages (Thorpe et al., 2020). Relatedly, if women's move into male-dominated fields is not mirrored by men's move into women-dominated fields, men's employment opportunities will likely diminish (Moss, 2000). As such, men pursuing careers currently dominated by women, such as ECEC, would broaden employment opportunities and give men access to more diverse career paths.

Men's increased representation in ECEC may benefit diversity in future learning outcomes of children. Despite the widespread belief that caring for young children is women's work (Akman et al., 2014), many parents tended to believe that male preschool teachers would offer children a different learning experience and were generally in favor of having more male educators (Ahmad et al., 2018; Sak et al., 2019). In fact, children in Danish kindergartens showed improved language learning when they attended a kindergarten with a higher proportion of male staff (Bauchmüller et al., 2014). Relatedly, children in Norwegian schools performed better on language and mathematics tests, when attending a preschool with a higher proportion of male staff (Drange & Rønning, 2017). Women and men in child care work have been found to show a similar level of attention and sensitivity toward children in their care (Colonnesi et al., 2017; van Polanen et al., 2017), and there appear to be no differences in their mental models of the environment (Ahi et al., 2017) or their motivations to teach (Bullough, 2015). The exact mechanisms of gender diversity in ECEC settings in improving children's learning outcomes remain unexplained. Various factors have been examined, such as experience with children, age of workers, size of child care center, or center resources; however, so far none explains the more favorable outcomes for children with care workers of different genders.

Men working in ECEC likely increase diversity in educational approaches, affording children a broader variety of learning experiences. Male educators have been shown to add diversity in objects, attitudes, and topics, expanding learning opportunities for children in their care (Andrä, 2020; Bosacki et al., 2015; Brandes et al., 2015; Emilsen & Koch, 2010; Melis et al., 2021; Sandseter, 2014). Further, they can broaden knowledge and perspectives of other educators (Storli & Sandseter, 2017). Male primary educators tend to perceive themselves as more competent with some aspects of digital technology (Latorre-Medina & Tnibar-Harrus, 2023) and implementing behavioral management strategies (Sak et al., 2015). Furthermore, more men working in ECEC has been related to reduced anxiety and withdrawal in children (Besnard & Letarte, 2017), higher quality play (Bigras et al., 2017), and greater

physical activity (Lagestad & Kippe, 2023; Nordmo & Meland, 2023). It is important to emphasize, however, that the aim of increasing men's representation is not to devalue the work of women working in ECEC, or remasculinize ECEC domains (Puzio & Valshtein, 2022), but should be framed through the lens of gender equality and eliminating barriers to men's presence in ECEC (Heikkilä, 2019).

Men, as the higher status gender group, typically have greater access to resources and power than women and other gender minority groups. This can be an advantage when attempting to create social change, as measures aimed at promoting gender equality are most effective when taking men into account (Farré, 2013; Meeussen et al., 2020). Approaching the issue from this perspective, this review differs from the existing literature reviews on men in women-dominated careers (i.e., Croft et al., 2015; Manzi, 2019; Meeussen et al., 2020) by focusing solely on actionable outcomes for men in ECEC, highlighting how men in ECEC could be better supported and which systemic, organizational, or cultural changes could benefit men's inclusion and sustainable representation in the field. To achieve this, we reviewed 120 articles from 2003 to 2023 and developed a road map of key areas for organizations and policymakers to focus targeted efforts to facilitate men's greater engagement with ECEC.

Method

Literature Search

To identify potentially relevant research, keyword searches were performed in three literature databases (APA PsycInfo, Web of Science, Scopus). A Boolean search string was used to search

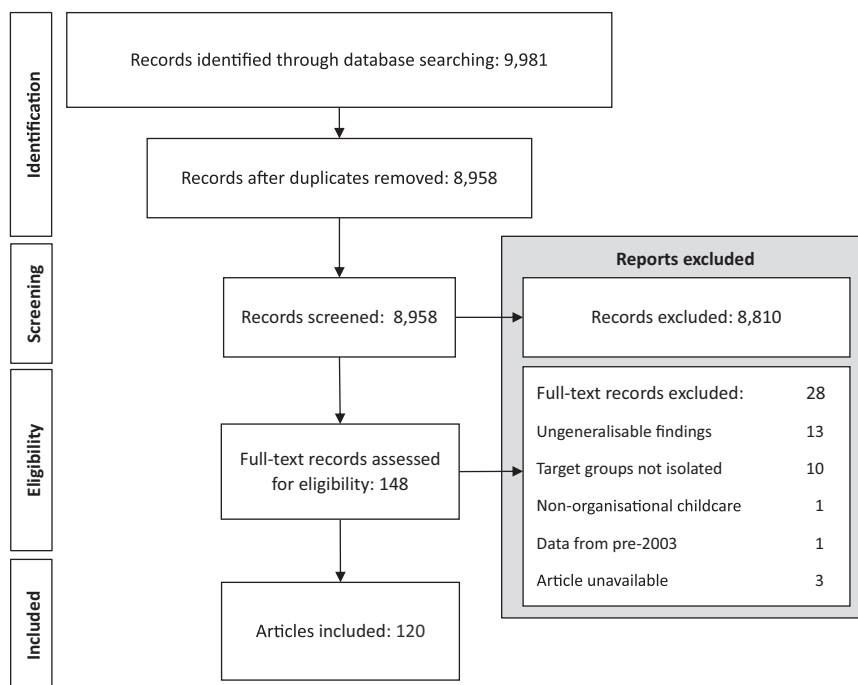
for research articles published in English, whose titles, abstracts, or author-provided keywords included the following terms: "male" or "men" *and* "child care" or "early childhood education" or "early childhood educator" or "ECEC" or "nursery." The search was limited to peer-reviewed psychology or social science articles published between 2003 and 2023 to cover the literature reflecting conditions in ECEC over the last 20 years.

To limit the scope of the search to the most relevant research, additional filters for research subjects were applied. For Scopus, the subject areas for inclusion were psychology, social sciences, nursing, arts and humanities, neuroscience, health professions, and multidisciplinary. For Web of Science, subject areas for inclusion were educational research, psychology, public environmental occupational health, psychiatry, business economics, neurosciences neurology, family studies, sociology, social sciences other topics, nursing, arts humanities other topics, women's studies, social work, health care sciences services, behavioral sciences, social issues, cultural studies, and Asian studies. This process yielded a total of 9,981 results. After the removal of duplicates, 8,958 remained. No filters were applied when searching APA PsycInfo. The PRISMA flow diagram (Figure 1) summarizes the literature search and screening process.

Screening Criteria

At the initial screening stage, the first author judged the title and abstract of 8,958 articles against the inclusion criteria. Articles were included if they related to gender equality, gender diversity, or the gender of professionals working in ECEC fields, such as primary education, kindergarten teaching, or child care work. Articles were

Figure 1
Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses Flow Diagram



also included if they related to gendered career choices in ECEC fields, such as adolescents choosing a future career, or teachers in training. Given our focus on men in professional child care settings, we excluded articles on domestic child care (i.e., fathers caring for their children, babysitters, or childminders), child care work in general (i.e., research relating to child care work that did not look at educators' gender), and postprimary education.

The decision for inclusion versus exclusion was recorded in Rayyan (Ouzzani et al., 2016), an online platform for title and abstract screening. If the title and abstract met the inclusion criteria, full-text copies of the article were retrieved for the next stage of screening.

At the second screening stage, we reviewed the full text of 149 articles for relevance. As a result of this, 28 were excluded because the findings were ungeneralizable beyond the study settings ($N = 13$), they did not isolate male early childhood educators from other target groups ($N = 10$), they did not relate to organizational child care ($N = 1$), they used data from before 2003 ($N = 1$), or the articles were unavailable ($N = 3$). A total of 120 articles meeting the inclusion criteria were identified.

Of the 120 articles reviewed, 71% of the articles based their statements on qualitative methods (e.g., interview studies, observational studies, and case studies), 24% on quantitative methods (e.g., experiments, surveys), 11% on mixed methodologies, and 14% on theoretical or review articles. Of the 106 studies with original data, 15.1% were conducted in North America, 9.4% in United Kingdom, 7.5% in Turkey, 5.7% in Australia, 5.7% in Sweden, 4.7% in Norway, 3.8% in China, 3.8% in South Africa, 3.8%

in Switzerland, 2.8% in Denmark, 2.8% in Germany, 2.8% in Greece, 2.8% in the Netherlands, 2.8% in Austria, 2.8% in Belgium, 2.8% in Spain, and 14.2% in two or more countries. The list of all articles screened can be found in the Supplemental Materials on the Open Science Framework at <https://osf.io/8aegu/>.

Findings

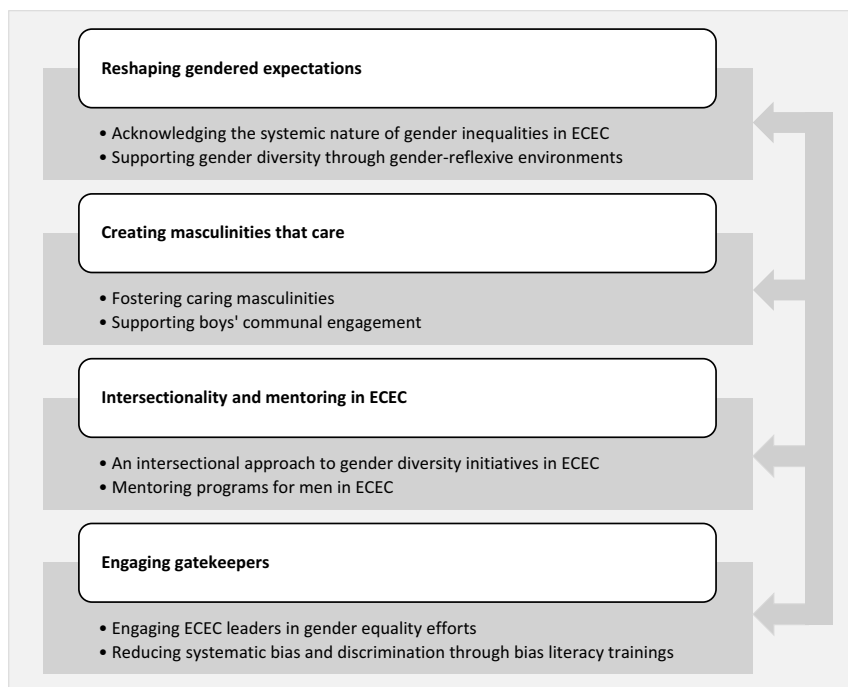
This review provides a theory-based road map of strategies to foster men's greater inclusion in ECEC. Figure 2 displays an overview of this road map, the details of which are discussed in the following.

Reshaping Gendered Expectations

Investment in gender equality initiatives and programs will likely remain limited, until the numerous benefits of men's greater involvement and the costs of their underrepresentation in ECEC are widely recognized. Within ECEC professions, there is some support for increasing men's engagement in the field (Ho & Lam, 2014; Sullivan et al., 2020). Despite this, there are few countries that have policies seeking to address men's underrepresentation (Oberhuemer, 2011). Many people believe that men's underrepresentation in ECEC is the result of naturally occurring influences, such as men's lack of motivation, rather than the result of limiting social structures (Block et al., 2019). This oversimplification of men's underrepresentation hides the reality that the dearth of men in ECEC is the result of a complex history of devaluing women's work and gendered expectations (Martino, 2008).

Figure 2

Systemic Roadmap for Increasing Men's Representation in Early Childhood Education and Care



Note. ECEC = early childhood education and care.

In fact, stereotypical beliefs about how men and women are and should be likely contribute to men's underrepresentation in ECEC. According to social role theory, stereotypes of men and women are associated with the characteristics required by the roles these two gender groups are typically observed to perform in society (Eagly & Wood, 2012). When people observe men more often in agentic leadership roles and women more often in communal caretaking roles, they assume men have dominant and goal-oriented qualities and women have nurturing and caring qualities (Koenig & Eagly, 2014). In addition, men as a social group hold a higher status than women, and as such, people assume traits associated with men have greater value than those of women (Croft et al., 2015; Schmader et al., 2001). Feminine-typed communal traits are perceived as lower status than masculine-typed agentic traits (Conway et al., 1996), which contributes to communal careers dominated by women being ascribed lower social value than careers dominated by men (Block et al., 2018; Puzio & Valshtein, 2022). Low-status associations of care-oriented careers increase the perceived incongruity between men's high societal status and work in ECEC. This has two major consequences: First, men tend to avoid pursuing careers in ECEC, and second, men who do work in ECEC are treated as "other" and may be more likely to be promoted faster or more frequently out of their care-oriented role into higher status administrative work than the women they work alongside.

Men can benefit from their token status in female-dominated careers. Research on the *glass escalator* phenomenon has found that men are sometimes more quickly promoted into high-status administrative positions than women (Altinkurt & Yilmaz, 2012; Blackmore, 1993; C. L. Williams, 1992, 2013) or were recruited on the basis of stereotypical associations with their gender (e.g., greater authority, management capabilities; Pirard et al., 2015). However, research on the glass escalator effect has been challenged and may be primarily the result of methodological issues in this research (Rohrmann & Brody, 2015). Whether men experience advantages because of their gender in ECEC settings or not, men themselves suggest that they are held to a different standard or afforded greater opportunities than their female colleagues in ECEC (Santos et al., 2022; Schwiter et al., 2021; Yang & McNair, 2020). For example, because women experience greater care burdens outside of work, female educators experienced greater stress and work-life balance difficulties during the COVID-19 pandemic (Leo et al., 2022). Additionally, the gender pay gap in care-oriented careers is greater than in any other employment sector (Kaveri, 2022). As such, the extent to which men working in ECEC benefit from their gender requires further examination. However, as will be discussed below, when implementing policies for gender diversity in ECEC, potential positive discrimination, with men profiting from their token status, should be avoided.

Despite the potential "benefit" of their token status, part of the reason men typically avoid pursuing careers in ECEC is because of its lower ascribed social value. High status and earning potential are in line with gendered expectations for men. Men are expected to behave in line with these expectations, often holding positions of greater status and power than women, which is typically referred to as vertical gender segregation. These social expectations, which emphasize the importance of high-paying, high-status jobs for men, may lead them to overlook female-dominated professions such as ECEC (Fu & Li, 2010; Thébaud, 2010). However, low status, power, and pay are not the sole reasons for men's

underrepresentation, as many men work in lower paying professions; they simply choose to do so in fields where there are more men (Honig, 2008). As such, other factors additionally contribute to men's underrepresentation in ECEC, such as discrimination (B. Koch & Farquhar, 2015; Sczesny et al., 2022).

For men pursuing a career in ECEC, the perceived incongruity between the requirements of the occupational role and the male gender role can result in economic or social penalties. For example, men's decision to pursue a career in ECEC is often not understood by people close to them (L. Zhang & Wang, 2018), and people who equate a man's success with his earning potential may judge men working in ECEC for not pursuing a more highly paid career (Heikkilä & Hellman, 2017). Further, experimental research shows men are perceived as less likable and posing a greater safety threat than women when applying for an elementary teaching position (Moss-Racusin & Johnson, 2016), which can hinder men's ability to professionally develop in ECEC (Eidevald et al., 2018). For example, parents in a London education district were skeptical about male early childhood workers' capacity to be competent and caring when looking after young children (Mathwasa, 2019). Addressing this discrimination requires reducing the perceived incongruity between attributes of the male gender role and ECEC work. A promising first step toward sustainable change could be raising public awareness through government campaigns.

Gender stereotypes and role beliefs shape people's career preferences and perceptions of fit for specific careers. A large body of research has examined antecedents and consequences of women's lack of fit perceptions with leadership positions (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Heilman, 2012). Consistent with lower problem awareness, less research has examined the perceived lack of fit or role incongruity between traits stereotypically associated with the male gender role and those associated with ECEC roles. Yet, theoretical work suggests that—similar to women's lack of fit perceptions for leadership—men's lack of fit perceptions for communal roles likely deter men from care-oriented professions such as ECEC (Block et al., 2018; Manzi, 2019). In a study of retention of Bachelor of Education (Early Childhood Studies) students in Australia, men were more likely than women to withdraw their enrollment (Kirk, 2020). This is likely related to the fact that men in ECEC are typically treated as "other" (Pullen & Simpson, 2009; Sullivan et al., 2020, 2023; Vandenberg & Peeters, 2008), that is, fundamentally different from those they work alongside (cf. Lovgren & Orupabo, 2023). Men working in ECEC often attempt to compensate for their perceived incongruity, adjusting to the feminized work environment either by conforming to rigid stereotypical gender divisions or constructing a new gender identity (Brody, 2015; Brody & Gor Ziv, 2020; Cameron, 2006; Hrženjak, 2019; Tennhoff et al., 2015; Xu & Waniganayake, 2018). In fact, in a study of South African male preservice teachers, gay men were believed to be more appropriate early childhood educators for young children than straight men, as a result of stronger associations with femininity (Moosa & Bhana, 2022; cf. Moss-Racusin & Johnson, 2016). Interventions to make ECEC workplaces more gender reflexive would likely reduce these potentially negative or isolating experiences for men, contributing to their sustainable representation in the field.

Empirical work suggests that (anticipated) structural discrimination likely discourages men from entering ECEC careers (Rentzou, 2011; Rentzou & Ziganitidou, 2009; Sargent, 2005). In a qualitative

study, preschool owners in South Africa indicated a strong preference for women when hiring new educators, suggesting that they were naturally better equipped to care for children than any men who may apply for the position (Okeke & Nyanhoto, 2021). Young men are not blind to these gendered preferences of selection committees. In fact, quantitative research finds that men show less interest in health care and education careers only when they think discrimination against their gender group is likely, but not when they learned that men are not discriminated against in these professions (Moss-Racusin et al., 2024). This finding suggests that men's lower motivation to pursue ECEC is subject to change and likely influenced by systemic factors such as the presence of perceived gender discrimination in the field. As such, increased policy attention and government support are necessary to increase men's representation in ECEC (Jones, 2016). Beyond perceptions of external discrimination, the incongruity men perceive between themselves and ECEC also need to be addressed to avoid men opting out of care-oriented career pathways.

To sustainably increase men's representation in ECEC, it seems crucial to foster men's feelings of belonging in caring roles. Gender-reflexive environments are one such means of creating a more inclusive atmosphere (Rohrmann, 2020). Gender reflexive refers to environments in which gender and its implications are carefully considered (Josephidou, 2020; Martin, 2003). This is an alternative to attempting to create gender-neutral professionalism in ECEC settings, which is impractical (Huber & Traxl, 2018; Xu et al., 2022). In gender-reflexive environments, employees are open to exploring "masculine" and "feminine" education and care strategies, developing a "gender conscious understanding of professionalism that goes beyond traditional gendered notions" (Peeters et al., 2015, p. 310). A related approach is the application of embodied intersectionality to the professional ECEC context, whereby the physical body is acknowledged as interacting with social categories, which then shape understanding (Ljunggren & Eidevald, 2023). Simply promoting gender parity between men and women in ECEC is unlikely to create lasting change; instead, discourses around gender and the resulting practices will likely need to be evaluated and addressed (Jones & Aubrey, 2019a).

In embracing this as a strategy, behaving in gendered ways while also seeking to reduce gender stereotypes would not be in conflict, but would instead create space for employees to challenge stereotype accuracy within their work through gender reflexivity (Martin, 2006; Rohrmann, 2020; Warin, 2019). Interventions to increase men's representation in ECEC should not reinforce binary-gendered thinking but encourage diversity in gender expression for all (Andrä, 2020; Hedlin et al., 2019; Van Laere et al., 2014; Xu, 2020b). Evidence suggests that natural surroundings and outdoor learning could serve as a less binary setting for educators to teach in and facilitate opportunities for educators to undertake all tasks (Nugent et al., 2019).

To avoid positive discrimination for male educators, ensuring that men are distributed equally throughout the organizational hierarchy (see discussion of *glass escalator* effect above) would reduce tokenism and may increase men's perceived congruity with the education and care of young children. Further, focusing on diversity in attributes of early childhood educators rather than solely focusing on gender may be beneficial in increasing gender diversity, without devaluing the contribution of women who already work in child care (Andrew, 2016). Rather than condemning the

"feminization" of ECEC careers, efforts should be made to address issues of gender inequality in the field and attract a more diverse workforce (Drudy, 2008). Specifically, focus should be placed on dismantling gender stereotypes and addressing systemic, structural barriers (Mallozzi & Galman, 2014).

Past research on diversity interventions suggest a system-focused approach to be most successful (Moss-Racusin et al., 2014; Vinkenburg, 2017). In attempting to bring more men into ECEC, focus should be placed on changing the system rather than simply increasing the number of male bodies in the classroom or reinforcing traditionally masculine ideals (Ebrahim, 2023; Wohlgemuth, 2015; Wright, 2018). One means of achieving this would be to create new modes of professionalism in ECEC to allow men space to create identities perceived to be congruent with caregiving work (Eidevald et al., 2018; Peeters et al., 2015). This could also benefit intersectional inclusion; for example, emphasizing the importance of male educators bringing their cultural and lived experiences into the classroom (Bryan, 2021) such as through imaginative play, could allow male educators to engage in complex conversations about ethnicity and gender (Bryan & Jett, 2018). The efficacy of such strategies in the context of ECEC is still unexplored; however, we suggest that efforts to reflect on gendered practices would likely increase men's sustainable representation in ECEC.

Creating Masculinities That Care

Masculinities—particularly traditional masculinities—likely play a large role in men's underrepresentation in ECEC. Broadly defined, masculinities are social and personal meanings attached to boys and men relating to the self, others, and objects and are situational, performative, and systemic (Wong & Wang, 2022). As such, masculinities are multifaceted and heavily context dependent. Masculinity ideologies refer to the importance given to culturally determined beliefs and attitudes about masculinity and the male gender role (Levant & Richmond, 2007; Pleck et al., 1993) and are perpetuated by friends, family, peers, and broader society. These ideologies form "macro masculinities", that is, expectations of men and boys participating in groups, institutions, and society (Wong & Wang, 2022). Traditional, hegemonic masculinities are often present and reinforced in ECEC contexts where male educators work (O'Keeffe & Deegan, 2018) and, for men working ECEC, can be perceived as both something to struggle against and a source of comfort and safety (Brody & Andrä, 2023). Despite some male educators relying on traditional conceptions of masculinity, they can constrain the ability of male educators to fully engage with their educational role (Mills et al., 2008; Sargent, 2013). To encourage and support men's engagement with ECEC and reduce men's role incongruity with care-oriented careers, it may be beneficial to challenge traditional masculinity ideologies and foster alternatives.

Due to their communal association, care-oriented careers are often perceived as incompatible with being a "real man" (Bhana et al., 2022; Moosa & Bhana, 2018), and adolescent boys reject the idea of pursuing careers in ECEC because of perceived incongruity with the male gender role (Anliak & Beyazkurk, 2008; Rentzou, 2013). Consequently, men are more likely to perceive teaching as a fallback career, as opposed to a first preference (Alvariñas-Villaverde et al., 2022; Ravhuhali et al., 2019). Interventions that attempt to change gender norms appear to be more effective in improving

gender equality than interventions that do not (Barker et al., 2007). As such, gender equality policies work best when taking steps to deconstruct social norms associated with traditional masculinity and give men opportunities to “live and learn gender equality in their local context” (Levtov et al., 2014, p. 27). A promising means of doing this is by fostering caring masculinities, which are defined by their lack of dominance and the integration of caring values (Elliott, 2016).

Caring masculinities can create promising avenues for changing gendered expectations of boys and men and increasing men’s sustainable engagement in care-oriented careers (Pappas, 2019). Men who work in ECEC often already alter their understanding of masculinity, incorporating alternate forms of masculinity into their professional identity (Brody, 2015; Buschmeyer, 2013; Hellman, 2021; Moosa & Bhana, 2023; Nentwich et al., 2013; Ottaviano & Persico, 2019; Tennhoff et al., 2015; Warin, 2006). Importantly, fostering caring masculinities allows men to explore aspects of their identity prohibited by traditional masculinity and thus has great potential to increase men’s representation in ECEC.

Promising for potential future change, the current conceptions of masculinity are not rigid and fixed but instead malleable and able to adapt to changing social norms (Valsecchi et al., 2023). Men working in ECEC can provide children with greater diversity in potential role models (Moosa & Bhana, 2019) or caregiver–child relationships (Fukkink, 2022). In fact, men aspiring to ECEC careers sometimes even intentionally choose this career because of its potential to change gender stereotypes and broaden perspectives on the male gender role, as explicitly indicated by many male ECEC workers in a qualitative study (Reich-Shapiro et al., 2021). Exposing boys and men to situations where communal masculine norms are evident could encourage the development of caring masculinities, allowing men an avenue through which to express care without conflicting with their perceived masculine role and thus reducing the perceived incongruence of masculinity with work in ECEC. For instance, young men described themselves as more communal when they were confronted with more communal masculine norms (Van Grootel et al., 2018).

Men working in early childhood education could demonstrate the compatibility of agentic and communal traits and contribute toward efforts for a more compassionate society (Gärtner et al., 2018; Van Grootel et al., 2018). However, it is important to note that we do not advocate for simply more male bodies in classrooms (Bryan & Williams, 2017; Mohandas, 2022), or for male child care workers to model specific behaviors, but to serve as educators in whichever way feels authentic (Brownhill, 2014, 2015). As such, they do not reinforce traditional masculine ideologies but instead contribute to diversity in children’s learning experiences. In addition to these benefits, supporting the development of caring masculinities has been linked to men’s engagement with gender equality efforts, benefitting broader society (Elliott, 2016).

Engaging boys in care-oriented activities from a young age—such as through school activities or community programs—is likely to broaden the rigid bounds of current conceptions of masculinity and support their communal engagement. Engagement in communal activities and fostering interest in ECEC can be implemented at all schooling levels—from preschool to higher education institutions (Rentzou, 2017). Examples of such interventions include a national boys’ future day in Germany, where boys are exposed to careers where men are in the minority (*Jungen-Zukunftstag*; <https://www.boys-day.de>).

Similarly, the project Boys in Care aimed to encourage boys and men to pursue careers in care from 2017 to 2019 (<https://www.boys-in-care.eu>).

Attempts to foster caring masculinities can begin with young children. Modeling gender equality for children also appears to reduce prejudice; men raised in families with greater gender equality reported more positive attitudes toward gender equality later in life (Levtov et al., 2014). Moreover, girls growing up in more egalitarian households were more interested in working outside the home and less in gender-stereotypical occupations (Croft et al., 2014). Reducing children’s exposure to gendered portrayals in media could lead to more adaptable understandings of gender, as media portrayals can either subvert or reinforce gender norms (Chang-Kredl, 2015). Thus, raising boys in environments with greater gender equality and supporting their communal engagement throughout childhood and adolescence may foster caring masculinities, and interest and engagement in ECEC professions in adulthood.

In addition to modeling gender equality for children at home, addressing and challenging gender stereotypes head on in school settings through open discussion may reduce children’s gendered perceptions (Xu, 2020a). Benefits of communal traits could be emphasized with campaigns supporting boys’ communal engagement at school (Tellhed et al., 2018; Van Grootel et al., 2018). In addition, mentoring programs can promote communality in adolescent boys and young men when they encourage an *ethos of care* (e.g., Umoja Network for Young Men; Jackson et al., 2014). Incorporating the promotion of communal activities in school curriculums or in community programs and rewarding children for demonstrating caring behaviors toward others may be a potential means of encouraging communal engagement in young boys, potentially fostering their interest in caring professions.

It is important to attempt to redress gender inequalities and foster interest in communal engagement in children from a young age (Ebrahim, 2023). In particular, because it has been suggested that boys may not opt out of ECEC because they consider it women’s work or “too feminine”, but rather because they have never been exposed to this as a potential future career (Wilkinson & Warin, 2022). Conversely, when men are more aware of the importance of ECEC and have a better understanding of what a potential future career in the field looks like, they are more interested in pursuing a career in ECEC (Sak et al., 2023). As such, promoting gender equality in the home and encouraging communal engagement throughout childhood and adolescence provides opportunities to increase men’s engagement in ECEC in later life.

Intersectionality and Mentoring in Early Childhood Education and Care

In attempting to implement interventions to encourage men’s inclusion in ECEC, it is important to foster engagement of different types of men to maximally increase diversity beyond gender alone. Workers in ECEC reflecting societal diversity would signal that there are not specific demographic characteristics that make a good carer or educator, but that this responsibility can be taken on by a wide range of people. Therefore, attempts to increase men’s representation in ECEC should consider which men are the target of these interventions. Media discussions about the underrepresentation of men in ECEC tend to focus on the lack of adequate role models for boys (e.g., Brueningsen, 2021; Moore, 2022). However,

this idea of bringing men in to serve as role models for children has been repeatedly called into question (Martino, 2008; Mills et al., 2004), though the exact meaning of “role model” is diffuse and all educators tend to serve as role models, regardless of their gender (Brownhill, 2015). This discussion around role modeling begs the following question: Which men should be the focus of intervention strategies for greater diversity in ECEC?

Men from minority ethnicities, those with lower socioeconomic backgrounds, or who identify as gay, bisexual, or transgender tend to be ignored in discussions of male underrepresentation in ECEC. For example, among teachers in the United States, Black men are even more underrepresented than White men (Bryan & Williams, 2017; Meidl, 2019). This appears to be part of a perpetual cycle of underrepresentation, as Black male students do not see themselves reflected in teaching staff, which is related to less interest in pursuing the profession (Goings & Bianco, 2016). Encouraging greater representation of a diverse variety of men—and people of other genders—in ECEC could ensure that future generations have the capacity to see themselves reflected in their educators and carers.

One potential means of encouraging greater intersectional diversity in ECEC is through mentoring programs. Mentoring programs are a means of reshaping gendered expectations and supporting men’s engagement in ECEC. Mentors are positive role models—experienced professionals who offer guidance to newer members of an organization and support their development and learning in their role. Mentoring programs in ECEC could allow men to feel supported and included, potentially reducing high turnover rates (Bryan & Williams, 2017; Porter, 2012). Mentoring relationships may be particularly advantageous for Black men, who are even more likely to be underrepresented than White men in ECEC (Meidl, 2019). Further, men who take on the role of mentor for other men in ECEC could lessen gender stereotypes of men’s low communion by increasing men’s visibility occupying professional roles in ECEC (Eagly & Koenig, 2021). In an Australian qualitative survey study of men in ECEC, male mentors were highlighted as a particular advantage, with men feeling better prepared for work-related challenges arising because of their gender (Sullivan et al., 2023). Further, there have been calls for male mentors in teaching roles during training and during supervision of placements in child care organizations to foster men’s engagement in the field (Mathwasa, 2019; Okeke & Nyanhoto, 2021).

Mentoring relationships are most beneficial when conducted in a purposeful and planned manner rather than simply creating a supportive bond between two people. Thus, an evidence-based, holistic, organizational approach is often best when building a mentoring program (see review by Stoeger et al., 2021). Mentoring in ECEC should be both intentional and targeted, serving as a means for men to navigate their role as an educator in the context of their gender identity (Reich-Shapiro et al., 2021). Evidence suggests that while potentially more beneficial, mentors need not necessarily be other male early childhood educators but could also be women who foster feelings of confidence and skill in their male colleagues (Sullivan et al., 2023). Male-to-male support is most necessary at the beginning of male educators’ careers, or in transitional phases, such as changing job (Wilkinson & Warin, 2022). As such, developing mentoring programs does not require a critical mass of men working in the field prior to implementation and does not need to put additional burden on the relatively few men in the field. Based on these findings, intentionally fostered mentoring relationships

would not only increase men’s skill set but also increase men’s employment longevity and job retention in ECEC.

Engaging Gatekeepers

Given recruitment takes place within gendered institutions, simply making more positions available for men is unlikely to be sufficient in addressing gender disparities (Dittmar, 2015). Gatekeepers are organizational decision makers and, as such, play a critical role in increasing occupational diversity (Vinkenburg, 2017). Research on women in traditionally male-dominated roles has found that gender diversity may be fostered by communicating shared values of inclusion and including diversity statements in job advertisements (Nater & Sczesny, 2016; Schmader et al., 2022). Support from organizations fosters occupational commitment and well-being (S. Zhang et al., 2023). Encouragement from supervisors and managers is key in encouraging men to pursue and remain in ECEC, and gatekeepers should actively attempt to recruit and include male educators (Jones & Aubrey, 2019b). Sustainable change is likely only possible with a prolonged, committed effort to achieving gender equality in ECEC (Heikkilä, 2018; Rolfe, 2006; Vandenbroeck & Peeters, 2008).

Men working in child care are affected by the level of organizational support they feel they receive. For example, how organizational leaders choose to navigate difficulties, such as parental concern, can have an impact on outcomes for male educators who work in their organization (Hedlin & Åberg, 2019). Further, male teachers tend to have lower levels of job satisfaction and higher levels of burnout (Sak, 2018; cf. Chen et al., 2023), which may be because their suggestions are more likely to be ignored than those of their female colleagues (Şahin & Sak, 2016). Diversity measures were found to be most successful when all members of an organization were engaged in the intervention and could define success on their own terms (Ely & Meyerson, 2000). To ensure employee engagement in diversity interventions, educating and engaging gatekeepers and organizational leaders is a valuable step.

Supporting men’s representation in ECEC requires that those making hiring and promotion decisions are not biased against men in their workplaces. Gatekeepers may not realize the difficulties male educators face or how they could be best supported (Wilkinson & Warin, 2022). Gender bias in gatekeepers is not the case of a few “bad apples” but the result of biased processes within organizations, which influence decision making. For example, research shows that professional guidelines for staff in ECEC organizations may discriminate against male educators (Leander et al., 2019). These discriminatory policies can negatively affect both male and female educators, perpetuating gender stereotypes and reinforcing gender inequalities (Pruit, 2015). When gatekeepers are held to account—such as being asked to justify their decision making—they are more likely to be cautious and less likely to make biased hiring decisions (see review by A. J. Koch et al., 2015). Organizational leaders should be responsible for assessing whether their work environment contributes to or reduces gendered tensions among early childhood educators (Bonnett & Wade, 2023). Organizational norms can influence gatekeepers’ decisions and approaches—leading to either greater or lesser stereotype-influenced decision making, depending on how easy it is to justify biased behavior in the context (Crandall & Eshleman, 2003).

Reducing bias in hiring processes and educating decision makers in ECEC can also be a means of encouraging sustainable representation of men in the field. Bias literacy training allows occupational gatekeepers to become both conscious of and competent in challenging biased decision making (Carnes et al., 2012; Vinkenburg, 2017). Specifically, bias literacy programs engage people in self-reflection and provide them with feedback, making them particularly effective in motivating behavioral change (Carnes et al., 2012), as they require active learning, concrete examples, and the ability to practice and receive feedback. Further, they can include experiential learning, allowing gatekeepers to confront their biases with less reactance (Moss-Racusin et al., 2014). In providing bias literacy trainings, organizations enable their gatekeepers to be actively engaged in striving for gender equality and reduce potential discrimination against men in ECEC.

Supporting equality in ECEC requires that those making hiring and promotion decisions are also not biased in favor of men in their workplaces either. As mentioned in the beginning of this article, some men working in ECEC experience the so-called glass escalator effect and are promoted out of their caring educator positions into leadership or administrative roles more quickly than the women they work alongside (C. L. Williams, 1992). This can create a culture of a “boys club” at the top and contribute to the remasculinization of ECEC leadership—something which is to be avoided if true gender equality is the goal (Martino, 2008). Organizational leaders should be responsible for assessing whether their work environment contributes to or reduces gendered tensions among early childhood educators (Bonnett & Wade, 2023). Strategies to support the engagement and inclusion of men should avoid supporting this preferential treatment of men in ECEC and instead seek gender diversity in both caretaking and leadership positions within organizations.

Discussion

This PRISMA review documents that men are underrepresented in ECEC because of both gendered social expectations and the lower ascribed social status of women’s work. We further reviewed several potential avenues of addressing men’s underrepresentation in ECEC explored by previous research, to highlight emerging suggestions from the literature that show the greatest promise.

Promising interventions include acknowledging the systemic nature of gender inequalities in ECEC as well as reshaping gendered expectations and organizational practices in ECEC. Based on our systematic review of research from the last two decades, we recommend that men’s engagement in ECEC could be fostered through addressing societal gender roles in childhood, implementing mentoring programs in ECEC, supporting men’s belonging through the creation of gender reflexive environments, and engaging gatekeepers to support men’s entry into ECEC careers. By acknowledging the systemic nature of occupational gender segregation, it becomes clear that men’s underrepresentation in ECEC is not simply a numeric issue of “not enough men” but rather a consequence of gendered assumptions, stereotypes, and social practices that reinforce gender inequality across society.

Interventions and policies to increase men’s representation in ECEC would benefit from empirical testing and evaluation. This would not only ensure efforts are effective in increasing gender diversity but also enable organizations to examine their

downstream effects on workplace culture, gender equality within the organization, and outcomes for children in their care. Including organizational data or metrics in the evaluation process can be used to determine a baseline and track organizational changes because of intervention (J. C. Williams, 2014). Valuable metrics for diversity interventions include “career outcomes, representation, and progression rates” (Vinkenburg, 2017, p. 221). Using a data-based approach in the evaluation of diversity interventions in ECEC, organizations could not only measure progress toward targets for men’s greater employment but simultaneously measure organizational gender distribution to ensure women take up leadership roles or are promoted at similar rates to men.

Consistent with the PRISMA guidelines (Page et al., 2021), our broad inclusion criteria allowed the identification of relevant research from the last 2 decades, covering a variety of perspectives. Yet, despite the inclusion and exclusion criteria being clearly defined in advance, having a sole reviewer making the decisions is a possible limitation. Another potential limitation of this research is that some of our recommendations are extrapolated from research on women’s underrepresentation in careers dominated by men. Though there is overlap in the negative consequences of occupational segregation and gender roles, the lower status of care-oriented careers, and particularly the care of young children, creates a unique environment, in which it is possible that some interventions for gender diversity may be less applicable or appropriate. Future research should continue to explore the nature of occupational segregation in care-oriented careers and ECEC more specifically to identify and test concrete strategies for supporting inclusion and diverse engagement.

Conclusion

Support for increasing women’s representation in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics careers only gained traction when governments, organizations, and society recognized this underrepresentation as problematic. Similarly, to overcome obstacles limiting men’s engagement and representation in care-oriented careers, it is important to reject the idea that men’s underrepresentation in ECEC mainly arises from men’s lack of motivation and interest.

Our integrated review identifies key areas for promising new research lines, and fostering men’s greater engagement and inclusion in ECEC, without devaluing the work of women in ECEC or ignoring systemic gender inequalities in which these organizations are based. In doing so, we identify specific strategies to implement in key areas, to serve as a road map for policymakers, ECEC organizations, and the broader public, with the aim of sustainably increasing men’s representation in this traditionally female-dominated field. Such efforts and men’s resulting sustainable representation in ECEC have manifold benefits and are crucial for continuing to take steps toward greater gender equality in broader society.

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