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## The 'brave' man in the early years: examining the ambiguities of being a male role model

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### Background

The call for more 'brave' male primary teachers (Plowden, 1967: 64) and early years practitioners remains prevalent in current educational discussions as boys' under-achievement and their disaffection with learning continues to dominate the education agenda (Baird, 2008). In an attempt to narrow the attainment gap between boys and girls, there appears to be a recognised need, backed by government policy, educationalists (Cook, 2006) and public discourse (Clarke, 2009) for more men to enter the early years and primary teaching profession and act as male role models. This is not only designed to raise boys' academic achievements, with particular emphasis on literacy (Ashley, 2006), but it is also intended to counteract the feminization of early schooling (Skelton, 2003) which is as a result of the 'soft pedagogical approaches' (Odih, 2002: 91) of the predominant number of females who work within the sector. The presence of more men in the early years and primary sector is also intended to offer those children who come from homes where the father is absent with access to a stable male or substitute/surrogate 'father figure' (Browne, 2008) who can relate better to them, providing them with a required level of stability which, in turn, will result in a rise in standards of behaviour.

Whilst there is widespread acceptance of the positive calling for more men to work with young children there are many educationalists, including Bricheno and Thornton (2002), Carrington et al. (2008) and Francis (2008), who challenge the rhetoric which underpins the role model argument, arguing that not only is there little to no evidence to suggest that boys' educational or social outcomes actually benefit from having a male teacher, but there is also a general lack of clarity or precision over the meaning of the term 'role model'. It is an exploration of this term which is the central focus of my current doctoral (EdD) research enquiry.

### Research Questions

There are four key questions which drive the direction of my current doctoral (EdD) research enquiry:

- 1, What does it mean to be a role model in the early years (0-8 years) of children's education?
- 2, How does one define the term 'role model' in relation to the early years (0-8) of children's education?
- 3, How is the notion of the male role model perceived by men who work in the early years sector (0-8)?
- 4, What tensions and dilemmas are there which relate to the male role theory?

The research engages a cross section of men with a range of roles and responsibilities who currently work in the early years (0-8 years) sector.

## Methods

This research has a mixed paradigm location, gathering both qualitative and quantitative research data. The research adopts an ethnographic methodological approach due to the nationally small population I wish to gather data from (men represent just 2.8% of the early years workforce (GTC, 2008)). A phased approach has been utilised in relation to the deployment of the three methods of data collection selected for this enquiry:

Phase One - Questionnaires for men who work in the early years sector (0-8yrs) (174 distributed, 51% return)

Phase Two - Focus groups with male managers and Head teachers who work in the early years sector (0-8 yrs) (one group interview conducted due to participant illness)

Phase Three - In-depth semi-structured interviews with men who work in the early years sector (0-8 years), following up lines of enquiry and areas of interest from Phases 1 and 2 (6 semi-structured interviews conducted)

## Frame

The data gathered from each phase of the enquiry has been analysed in various ways:

Phase One: Descriptive and summary statistics using percentages,

frequencies, graphs and charts (Tisdall et al. 2009)

Phase Two: Content analysis (Sharp, 2009) involving word

counts and the identification of categories

Phase Three: Research data is currently being analysed using an

adapted approach to grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967).

Analysis and discussion of the findings from all three phases is to be undertaken Spring 2010.

## Research findings

A bullet point summary of some of the key findings from Phases One and Two include:

- Employing more men to work in settings and schools is seen as a way of providing boys with positive role models, even though 99% of questionnaire respondents believe that females can be good role models for boys. It is perceived that role models for young boys do not have to be human - TV and computer game characters are considered to be role models.
- 99% of questionnaire respondents consider themselves to be role models to both boys and girls due to personal perceptions of them being a 'good example'. This challenges by the research work of Bricheno and Thornton (2007) which claims that children do not actually see their teachers as role models.
- Attempts at defining the term 'role model' stress the notion of emulation; a role model is perceived as someone who demonstrates 'positive characteristics' and is 'well behaved'.
- The notion of 'being reliable' and able to 'demonstrate positive attitudes towards learning' were identified as the most important qualities/characteristics for a role model to emulate to young children. Being 'a good listener' was the most frequently identified quality from the

additional sixty six qualities/ characteristics offered by questionnaire respondents. Being 'a disciplinarian' was not seen to be of importance.

- It is strongly believed that the gender of the teacher/practitioner has little bearing on raising the academic achievements of boys - it is whether they are a 'good' teacher/practitioner in terms of their learning and teaching capabilities that is deemed to be more important.