

Greek Female Early Childhood Educators' Perceptions Towards Their Male Co-workers

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Abstract

Despite the importance of male early childhood educators for the development of the whole child and for the provision of high – quality care and education in preschoolers (Rentzou and Ziganitidou, 2009) and the benefits for children, parents, female fellow workers, men themselves and the profession of early childhood education and care (Cameron, 2006; Sakellariou & Rentzou, 2007; Farquhar, 2005; Rentzou and Ziganitidou, 2009; Rolfe, 2005; Fine – Davis et al., 2005; Peeters, 2007) still the gender imbalance in childcare and early years work remains significant.

The study reported here examined female early childhood educators' perceptions of barriers to men entering the early childhood education and care profession and their recommendations for recruiting more males into the field. Early childhood educators were asked to respond on a Likert scale to statements regarding males' decision to enter the profession, possible benefits for male early childhood educators, and perceived societal attitudes towards male early childhood educators.

The findings indicated that participating educators maintain that males can behave in the same ways as their female co-workers but at the same time they recognize the difficulties men encounter when choosing to become early childhood educators. Further, participants pointed that stereotypical factors and prejudices discourage males from choosing to become early childhood educators.

1. Introduction

The issue of male early childhood educators can be characterized as both emotive and topical (Cameron, 2006; Rolfe, 2005; Mills et al., 2004). Last decades, there has been an increasing interest in and awareness of the need to recruit more men in the field of early childhood education (Peeters, 2007).

The gender distribution among the early childhood workforce appears to be similar across most countries, except the Nordic countries. Data from European and other countries show some variations, but men usually account for well below 5 per cent of the workforce (Cameron, 2006; Farquhar et al., 2006; Rolfe, 2005). In Greece the Pan-Hellenic Union of Day Care Workers commented that only 17 of its 2.800 members are males (personal communication, 2009). On the other hand, there are not statistical data about the Departments of Preschool Education which come under universities.

Though recruiting more males into the field is not a new trend (Clyde, 1994; Barnard et al., 2000; Martin & Luth, 2000), and despite the fact that in recent years there seems to be a growing demand for male teachers, both our knowledge and experience around the topic of male early childhood educators are extremely sketchy, and relevant research is limited (Cameron, 2001).

Despite its topical nature, the issue remains emotive since around the globe it is an accepted norm that few men are employed in early childhood services. The under-representation of men in early childhood education is not considered as being a problem in the provision of quality early childhood services, in ensuring equal employment opportunities for teachers or in ensuring non-sexist learning environments for children.

One of the myths and stereotypes about why so few men work with young children is that men are not wanted or needed to work with them, since the provision of care is traditionally considered as being a women's task. However, previous research findings indicate that most people want loving and caring men involved in children's lives (Lyons, et al., 2005; Rolfe, 2005; Fine – Davis et al., 2005; MORI, 2003; Peeters, 2005). However, as Nelson (2004) has emphasized, in order for this to happen it is essential to challenge the myths and stereotypes about male early childhood educators.

In order to achieve this goal, we consider it essential to explore Greek society's attitudes and perceptions towards that issue. The present study,

acknowledging the importance of the researched topic and the need to examine the reasons why males do not choose to become early childhood educators, aims at exploring female early childhood educators' perceptions towards their male colleagues. More precisely, the study reported here aims at exploring females' perspective of the perceived barriers to men entering the field of early childhood education and care and of the societal attitudes towards males as well as the strategies which districts and administrators can implement to recruit and retain more men in that field.

2. Research Methodology

2.1 Sample

30 female early childhood educators, who work in day care centers in Ioannina city, participated in the present study. Participants' age ranged from 26 to 51 years. 46.7% fits in the 41-45 group age, 23.3% in the 36-40 age group, 13.3% in the 26-30 group, 13.3% in the 31-35 group and 3.3% in the 50+ group. Participants' years of experience ranged from 1 to 25. 34.5% of the sample stated that they have 6 to 10 years of experience, 20.7% that they have 16 to 20 years of experience, 17.2% that they have 1 to 5 or 21 to 25 years of experience and 10.3% that they have 11 to 15 years of experience. Participants' level of education was distributed as follows: 24 had graduated from a Technological Educational Institute, Dept. of Early childhood education and care (80%), 5 from university, Dept. of Preschool education (16.7%), and one from a secondary education institution, Dept. of early childhood education and care.

48% of the sample works in public day care centers, 41.4% in day care centers run by organizations and 10.3% in private day care centers. All day care centers are located in urban sites. The majority of the sample works in classes with toddlers, 28% in infant classrooms whereas 17.9% works in preschool classrooms.

2.2 Measures

In order to examine female early childhood educators' perceptions a Likert – based survey, adapted from Barnard et al. (2000), was administered.

The first part of the survey asks respondents to state their opinions regarding males' decision to become early childhood educators; benefits for male early childhood educators; and societal attitudes towards male early childhood educators. Each item consists of a statement about male early childhood educators, scored by circling the appropriate number on a 4-point Likert-type scale (1 = "strongly agree" to 4 = "strongly disagree").

Based on the literature review a second part was added to the original survey. In this second part some of the reasons why men do not choose to become early childhood educators are listed. Each item includes a reason for which, according to the literature, men choose not to become early childhood educators, and is scored by circling the appropriate number on a 4-point Likert-type scale (1 = "strongly agree" to 4 = "strongly disagree").

Cronbach Alpha has been found to be .84 for the first part of the survey and .79 for the second part of the survey.

For the needs of the statistical analysis the two parts of the survey have been combined.

3. Analysis of the Results

Table 1 depicts participating female early childhood educators' perceptions about the barriers to males choosing to become early childhood educators. Furthermore, are depicted their perceptions about societal attitudes towards males.

Table 1.

Female early childhood educators' perceptions about the barriers to males' choosing to become early childhood educators

Barriers and Perceptions	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Salary level is a reason why men do not opt to become E.C. educators	0.00	63.30	36.70	0.00
The current wages are adequate to recruit men into that profession	6.70	26.70	56.70	10.00

Long-range salary projections influence males as to how long they intend to remain in that profession	10.00	56.70	26.70	6.70
Males tend to move into a field outside education due to the potential for greater earnings	10.00	46.70	40.00	3.30
A male's decision to become an E.C. educator is influenced by having a male elementary teacher who they perceived as a role model	6.70	30.00	63.30	0.00
A male's decision to become an E.C. educator is influenced by having a female elementary teacher who they perceived as a role model	6.70	30.00	63.30	0.00
A male's decision to become an E.C. educator is influenced by his experiences working with young children in another capacity	6.70	60.00	33.30	0.00
A male's decision to become an E.C. educator is influenced by having a family member or friend in the teaching profession	6.70	50.00	43.30	0.00
A male's decision on a career in E.C. is made more difficult due to an awareness of the low numbers of men working in the field	16.70	63.30	13.30	6.70
Males feel isolated as E.C. educators with so few men in that profession	3.30	70.00	20.00	6.70
Career structure influences males' decision to enter that profession	3.30	66.70	30.00	0.00
Men usually prefer higher status professions	16.70	73.30	10.00	0.00
Men do not wish to be subordinate of women in their job, something that is possible if they opt to become early childhood educators	13.30	60.00	23.30	3.30
Males do not opt to become early childhood educators because	0.00	16.70	70.00	13.30

they fear that women will be hostile towards them in order to protect their positions				
I feel that parents are supportive and accepting of males in E.C.E.	10.00	53.30	36.70	0.00
I feel the community as a whole is accepting of males in E.C.E.	0.00	66.70	30.00	3.30
I feel society and our culture still questions the motives of men who choose a career in E.C.E.	3.30	60.00	36.70	0.00
Program administrators are suspicious about males candidates' motives	10.00	33.30	53.30	3.30
Program administrators feel that it is risky to hire male early childhood educators	0.00	23.30	76.70	0.00
Males are less likely to be accepted in programs training E.C. educators	0.00	33.30	63.30	3.30
As boys, men learn that E.C.E. profession is a women's work	26.70	60.00	13.30	0.00
I feel males cannot act in the same manner as female coworkers in situations such as being alone with children or displaying affection towards them	0.00	30.00	56.70	13.30
Women are naturally more nurturing than males	0.00	56.70	33.30	10.00
The potential for accusations of sexual abuse of children in a male teacher's classroom may cause males to avoid E.C.E.	13.30	23.30	50.00	13.30
Program administrators attempt to dissuade males from teaching at the early childhood level	0.00	23.30	70.00	6.70
Males do not complete their studies when they enter a higher education program	6.70	46.70	36.70	10.00

Table 2 summarizes participants' statements when asked about the ways which could help towards recruiting more males into early childhood education and care profession.

Table 2.

Participants' views about ways for recruiting more male early childhood educators

Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Providing opportunities for young men to work with children would persuade more men to become early childhood teachers	6.70	90.00	3.30	0.00
Providing men who enter the early childhood profession with signing bonuses would recruit more men into the profession	16.70	60.00	20.00	3.30
Providing men who enter the early childhood profession with housing grants would recruit more men into the profession	16.70	56.70	26.70	0.00
Forgiving college loans for men who enter the early childhood profession would recruit more men to teach young children	13.30	60.00	26.70	00.00
Many men would be more likely to accept a position in early childhood if they were assured the school was committed to hiring more than one man	16.70	60.00	16.70	6.70
Teacher education programs should promote programs that recruit men to teach young children	16.70	73.30	10.00	0.00

Media campaigns would help recruit more men to become early childhood teachers.	23.30	73.30	3.30	0.00
Advertising which appeals to more “masculine” aspects of the early childhood profession would help recruit men to teach young children	16.70	66.70	16.70	0.00
Advertising which appeals to men’s “nurturing instincts” would help recruit men to work in the early childhood profession	20.00	53.30	26.70	0.00

4. Discussion

Research data revealed that though participants are in favor of men entering the profession of early childhood education and care, there are still stereotypical perceptions about men’s role in children’s education and care. Participating women, acknowledge that low salaries and the weak career structure of that profession are among the main barriers to males’ decision to enter this profession, maintaining that males, compared to females, prefer professions with greater earnings and higher status.

The main reason why males do not opt to become early childhood educators is, according to the females in this sample, the low numbers of men working in the field. Though participants postulate that men are supported and accepted by parents and the society and it is easy for them to get hired, they acknowledge that men’s motives are still questioned. Participating female early childhood educators seem to acknowledge that there are stereotypical perceptions, since according to their reports as boys, men learn that early childhood education and care profession is a women’s work. Though in their majority they dispute the argument that males cannot act in the same manner as female coworkers, they have their own prejudices since they stated that women are naturally more nurturing and more capable with children.

Research findings from this study appear to substantiate previous research evidence. The low salaries, the weak career structure and low status of the profession, the low numbers of men working in the field, their isolation due to this, coupled with fear of child abuse allegations and societal perceptions of suspicion and mistrust are reasons why males do not opt to become early childhood educators (Rolfe, 2005;

Cameron et al., 1999; Jensen, 1996; Barnard et al., 2000; Fine – Davis et al., 2005; MORI, 2003; Peeters, 2005; Lyons et al., 2005; Owen, 2003).

The literature review reveals that even in more modern societies than Greece, society tends to mistrust and suspect males and that there is an initial rejection of the male teacher. According to research findings, initial rejection is changed only after male teachers “prove” themselves to be suitable for their unusual choice (Rentzou & Ziganitidou, 2009; Fine-Davis et al., 2005; MORI, 2003; Peeters, 2005; Shaham, 1991; Russo & Feder, 2001).

Providing opportunities for young men to work with children would persuade more men to become early childhood teachers and media campaigns are, according to participants, strategies which could help towards recruiting more males into the early education and care profession.

Previous research designs exploring males’ perceptions (Shaham, 1991; Rentzou and Ziganitidou, 2009; Sakellariou & Rentzou, 2007) have indicated that female early childhood educators are, according to the males who participated in those studies, positive and friendly towards male early childhood educators. Though results from the present study substantiate previous research results, they should be carefully interpreted, since according to Shaham (1991) “in theory most people favour increasing their (male’s) numbers, but in practice many of us do not really welcome particular real men when they actually express an interest in working with young children” (p. 10).

In conclusion, both the results of this particular study and previous research results indicate that though males are welcomed in the field of early childhood education and care, there still exist stereotypes concerning genders’ roles. Despite the fact that society has moved on and men are more actively engaged in caring for their children, as Farquhar et al. (2006) argue the early childhood workforce seems stuck in the 1970s family model and people are simply not socialised toward thinking of caring for young children as a man's activity. Getting more men into childcare services is a long process that cannot happen overnight. However, it is important to start the process moving since in order to provide quality early childhood education and care it is essential to have both males and females in the early childhood workforce (OECD, 2006).

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