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Exploring the Experiences of Male Early Childhood Aspiring Teachers

Tingting Xu, Stephen F. Austin State University

Early childhood education is an occupational field that is recognized as gendered (Cannella, 2008; Sargent, 2005; Sumsion, 2005) yet gender imbalanced (Durdy, 2008) with approximately 95% of preschool and Kindergarten teachers being female (Burton et al., 2002; Lyons, Quinn, & Sumson, 2003; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2008). Although there are male teachers, the percentage of male teachers in the early childhood field is less than 5%. Although the numbers of male teachers have been historically low, trends have shown a slight increase in the number of males in early childhood education (Cushman, 2007; Smith, 2004; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015). This increase may be due to calls for increasing quantities of male teachers in early childhood education (Sumsion, 2000) and an emphasis on male teachers to be more actively involved in the lives of children (Cameron 2001; Harris & Barnes, 2009). This emphasis is further supported by idea that male teachers could have a positive influence on children's development at various levels (Nelson & Sheppard, 2005; Peeters, 2007). For instance, male teachers may provide a positive male role model for children (MacNaughton & Newman, 2001; Martino, 2008). Tennhoff, Nentwich, and Vogt (2015) also suggest that the inclusion of male teachers in the classroom may place more emphasis on masculinity when learning materials and activities associated with masculinity are being explored or taught. Researchers such as Huber, Vollum, and Stroud (2000) suggest that male teachers might be more likely to meet the need of boys from boys' perspectives and experiences, and help increase boy's academic engagement and learning interests.

Moving beyond the influence on child development, the increased presence of male teachers in early childhood settings may also help balance the number of male and female teachers (Cushman, 2007; Foster & Newman, 2005), potentially improve social dynamics and relationships in the workplace (Jensen, 1998), and meet the needs of the early childhood education field in terms of professionalism with masculinity (Tennhoff, Nentwich, & Vogt, 2015). Although the literature is making the aforementioned assumptions, it is not the intent of the author to affirm or validate these claims. The purpose is simply to report what has been published as I seek to unpack the experiences of aspiring male teachers in early childhood environments.

However, it is believed that an increased number of socially cognizant male teachers may benefit early childhood education field through deconstructing the patriarchal foundation that early childhood education has been built on (Cannella, 2008). Furthermore, it becomes imperative that I move beyond the dichotomous foundation of gendered female-male binary and expand the gendered referencing to represent a wider scope of gendered identities. Females, males, and intersex individuals could re-define early childhood education from "women's work" toward something more gender-equitable (Cannella, 2008).

Attitudes and Perspectives towards Male Teachers

There continues to be a call for more male teachers in English speaking countries (Mills, Martino, & Lingard, 2004). Policies have been adopted to promote gender equity at school (Younger & Warrington, 2008), such as Queensland's *Male Teachers'*

Strategies, and address the lack of diversity in teaching force, such as USA's *Increasing Teacher Diversity* (2011) from the Center for American Progress. Besides adopted policy, many strategies have been developed to increase the number of male teachers (Cushman, 2007; Froese-Germain, 2006; Livingstone, 2003; Thornton & Bricheno, 2006). For example, programs with non-traditional routes were development in teacher education, such as the Troops to Teachers Program (Defense Activity for Non-Traditional Education Support, 2013), and the "Call Me MISTER" (Jones & Jenkins, 2012) program. However, stereotypes toward male teachers who work with young children seem to cause strong opposition to the idea of increasing the number of male teachers (Younger & Warrington, 2008). Research suggests that there are negative opinions regarding male teachers working with young children (Cohen, 1992; Skelton, 1991; Sumsion, 2000; Washington, 2009). Assumptions of child abuse or sexual harassment are often made toward male teachers (Cushman, 2005a; Skelton, 2001). Males might be perceived with ill motivation or viewed as pedophiles (Buschmeyer, 2013; Cremers & Krabel, 2012). Physical contact with young children becomes a conflicting issue for many male teachers and has been reported in multiple research studies (i.e. Cooney & Bitter, 2001; Cushman, 2005a). Due to this issue, many childcare programs and schools have implemented "no touch" policies in order to "prevent" child abuse (Feeney, Moravcik, & Nolte, 2016). Male teachers often receive negative prejudice against them and often feel socially isolated in early childhood environments (Wardle, 2003). Many other issues might also drive males away from this teaching field, such as "low salaries, family and other influences on entering the field, teaching beyond the basics, improving preservice education,

recruitment of males into the field, and advantages/disadvantages of being male in a field dominated by females" (Cooney & Bittner, 2001, p. 78). Female identity in early childhood teaching is recognized as "normal women's work" in our society (Cannella, 2008; Van Laere, Vandenbroeck, Roets, & Peeters, 2014). Research further examined this phenomenon and found specifically that student teachers viewed teaching as "acceptable women's work" (Cammack & Phillips, 2002, p. 131).

Social Identity Theory, Identity Theory, and Gender Socialization Theory

The theoretical perspective for understanding the experiences of aspiring early childhood educators is guided by Social Identity Theory (Hogg & Abrams, 1988), Identity Theory (Burke & Tully, 1977), and Gender Socialization Theory (Henslin, 1999). It is important to recognize that some view each of these three theories as isolated, separate theories (Hogg, Terry, & White, 1995) and others recognize similarities and overlaps between the three (Stets & Burke, 2000). A rationale of the significance of each theory for the particular purpose of this study is explained below.

Construction of identity occurs through processes guided by the social environment and the self through a reflexive process. Does this occur through a process of self-categorization (Social Identity Theory) or through a process of identification (Identity Theory)? Could it be that both could occur depending on the person and/or environment? It could be either, both, or neither. However, both are relevant as both are possible.

Through self-categorization of social identity theory, the individual's identity forms through the belonging to a social group (Hogg & Abrams, 1988; Stets & Burke, 2000). Within this process, the

person self-categorizes and compares socially their similarities and differences to others within their associated group. Through this process of self-selecting and self-evaluating, self-concept and self-esteem assists in the formation of a self-identity. Social Identity explains an individual's sense of belonging to a social group (Hogg & Abrams, 1988). Within this social group, individuals share a common social identity (Hogg & Abrams, 1988). People usually categorize them in one group (the in-group) compared to others (the out-group) (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell 1987).

Within Identity Theory (Burke & Tully, 1977), the person engages in an identification process that "categorizes the self as an occupant of a role, and the incorporation, into the self, of the meanings and expectations associated with that role and its performance" (Stets & Burke, 2000, p. 225). Ultimately, these meanings and expectations guide behavior and create social expectations (Burke & Reitzes, 1981). The person takes on the "role" within society to guide their actions, not the constant comparison approach within social identity theory. However, it must be noted that "much of the meaningful activity within a role that is governed by identity revolves around the control of resources (Burke, 1997)" and that "this feature as much as anything, defines social structure" (Stets & Burke, 2000, p. 225). Theories in both Identity Theory and Social Identity Theory also agree a structured society informed individuals' understanding about the meanings and expectations.

Stets and Burke (2000) provide a key distinction between Social Identity Theory and Identity Theory, saying:

> Having a particular social identity means being at one with a certain group, being like others in the group, and seeing things from the group's perspective. In contrast, having a particular role identity means acting to fulfill the expectations of the role, coordinating and negotiating interaction with role partners, and manipulating the environment to control the resources for which the role has responsibility. (p. 226)

The difference is between the uniformity of perception and action versus the differences in perception of action. This distinction leads us to Gender Socialization Theory.

Gender Socialization Theory (Henslin, 1999) is more streamlined and can be simply described as the socialization process that occurs to define gender roles, expectations, and identities. Gender socialization is considered as "an important part of socialization" in which boys and girls were set onto different paths due to their gender (Henslin, 1999, p. 76). For example, girls may learn to clean the house and cook dinner while boys may learn to maintain the structural aspects of the house and appliances. Gender Socialization Theory is connected to both Social Identity Theory and Identity Theory due to self-categorization and role expectations. Furthermore, Gender Socialization Theory can provide a reasoning to why teaching young children is viewed as women's work and as a women's profession. It also provides a theoretical assumption as to why stereotypes exist toward male teachers working with young children. For example, female and male identities are influenced and shaped by the treatment received within their community or their role within their community, which also influences how females or males perceive themselves in this teaching field. Given the reality that teaching has been socially recognized as women's work and males are not positively recognized in the early childhood education field, a negative identity may be established. It makes females in the in-group (however controlled) and males in the out-group. With

such social identity, males might find themselves uncomfortable working in the early childhood field or giving up the idea of working with young children. Furthermore, gendered roles, notions, and expectations are formed which can push males toward other career pathways as described in Identity Theory.

Problem Statement

Evidence has shown that males are either not interested in teaching young children or choose to leave this profession early in their careers (Cushman, 2007). Only 4.4% of male students chose this profession and enrolled in early childhood teacher education program (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistic, 2008). Within this number, only one-fourth completed their academic program and become certified as teachers (Thèrèsea & Ayşe, 2010). With such limited numbers of male students who enrolled in and succeeded in early childhood education teacher education programs, limited information about male pre-service teachers' experience in teacher training process is accessible. In order to recruit and support male pre-service teachers in early childhood education this study intends to fill in the aforementioned the gap in accessible research. It is hopeful that data and findings from this study provide a guide to ensure the success of male aspiring teachers in their attempts to complete teacher education and entering the teaching field. The current study investigated the teacher preparation experiences of 12 male pre-service aspiring teachers with the intention to understand the following two guiding research questions:

1) What influences male pre-service teachers' decision in becoming a teacher in early childhood education?
2) What issues and barriers do male pre-service teacher encounter during teacher preparation?

Method

This study adopted an exploratory research design through qualitative approaches to collect primary data. Qualitative research methodology is used in this study because it investigates phenomena through in-depth exploration of experiences of a small group of participants (Creswell, 2012), which fits this study. Eisner (1998) also explained, "it is through qualitative inquiry, the intelligent apprehension of the qualitative world, that we make sense" (p.21).

Participants

The current study adopted sequential and snowball sampling procedures with an accessible, convenient sample (Goodman, 1961; Morgan, 2008). Twelve male pre-service teachers were identified and interviewed as this was the total male sample from the current population of aspiring teachers enrolled in the program at the time of data collection. Participants were between the ages 20 to 33 years old with a mean age of 23.6. Each participant was currently enrolled in the Elementary Education (EC-6) teacher education program in rural East Texas. Candidates were limited to two options when enrolling in the program. The first was Early Childhood to sixth grade (EC-6) and the other was Middle Level Grades (MLG), grade four through eight. Currently, the program does not have an Early Childhood to 3rd grade (EC-3) program like many programs due to past requirements of the Texas Education Agency (TEA). However, most candidates in the EC-6 program were interested in EC-3 while those interested in grades four through eight choose the MLG program.

The candidacy status of the participants in this study varied from pre-professional or pre-practicum to professional or student

teaching in the classroom settings ranging from Pre-K to 3rd grade. Eight of these 12 participants were placed in Kindergarten or earlier grade. Most participants were White/European American (n=7), four were Hispanic/Latinx American, and one identified as Asian American.

Data Collection

In order to understand male pre-service teachers' teacher preparation experiences, in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted. Interviews were guided by a list of predetermined questions developed and adopted based on information documented in literature (i.e. Anliak & Beyazkurk, 2008; Cooney & Bittner, 2001; Erden, Ozgun, & Ciftci, 2011). Before each interview, the researcher informed the participant about this study and the fact that the interview would be audio recorded. Furthermore, each participant was asked if he had any questions or concerns before initiating the interview. Followed by the signed consent form, the interview started. This study gained permission from the university Institutional Review Board.

The interview questions were, but not limited to, the following:
1. What inspired or influenced you to choose this profession? (Is this the only profession that you wanted to pursue originally?)
2. Please identify and describe the values and beliefs that guide your teaching.
3. Please describe the reactions of your parents, friends, relatives and the other people close to you when you chose this profession.
4. As a male preschool pre-service teacher, do you feel that you are treated differently by the lecturers and classmates? If so, please elaborate.
5. What are the advantages and disadvantages of this profession for a male teacher or pre-service teacher?
6. What are your expectations about your future teaching career?

Data Analysis

For data preparation, demographic data were collected and organized in excel. Each participant was assigned a number. The audiotaped interviews were reviewed multiple times and transcribed following the order of questions and responses. Open coding (Strauss, 1987) was used to analyze the data. The researcher and the research assistant randomly selected 30% of audio transcriptions to initialize the codes. Each transcription was coded separately, then generated codes were discussed and compared, and finally an initial set of codes was developed. We then color-coded the rest of the responses and compared and discussed any discrepancies. Information and codes were added when needed. We then examined all codes and organized them into categories for generating themes to drive further data analysis (Creswell, 2007). During the coding process, the "check code" process of inter-rater reliability was carried out (Miles & Huberman, 1994); as a result, a high level of agreement (83.5%) was reached.

Results

Throughout the process of exploring data, five themes emerged. The themes are organized in the following sections and include the reasons for choosing early childhood education, support from family and friends, conflicts and differences within the program structure, future career opportunities, and increased male representation in early childhood education. Each theme is presented below. However, in summary, the findings from this study suggests that gender plays an important role

influencing the experiences of determining early childhood education as a career track as well as the experiences within an Elementary Education (EC-6) teacher preparation program.

Reasoning for Choosing Early Childhood Education

Participants shared their reasons for choosing early childhood education as their profession. Among the reasons described, all participants' responses indicated that they preferred to work with younger children and want to support them positively. Furthermore, the participants seemed to have a desire to provide as optimal educational experience as possible for their future students. One participant stated, "I want to give the best instruction in teaching that I can…" while another participant stated:

> I want to teach kids. You teach them for the future and prepare them for the future…I believe because [younger kids] are sponges and they take in more. They want to interact and want to learn…I love to teach and interact with the children.

It seems obvious that these participants are driven by an innate love and care for children.

Within this theme, participants also suggested that there seems to be an age-driven purpose similarly to what was also included in the second response above. One participant stated, "I'm better with little kids than I am with older kids," while another participant expanded to also include a gendered directed statement when this participant stated, "I wanted to do kindergarten, …because I just like that younger age because they are more impressionable I guess…really just be that father figure and show love to the children. I really just wanted to teach them."

Repeatedly, participants indicated choosing early childhood education due to their love and care for children as well as their desire to have an influence both socially and academically on the development of the young child.

Support from Family and Friends

The second theme that emerged was support from family and friends. Participants identified that they found their relatives and friends to be mostly supportive with their decision to become an early childhood education teacher. Two participant responses demonstrate the level of perceived support from those close to them. The first participant stated:

> My parents are wonderful, two of the most wonderful people I've ever met so they supported me, no questions asked. My mom was a teacher growing up. My dad was a choir teacher for a while before becoming a minister, so they were all for me going into the teaching field. They knew that was where I wanted to be.

Similarly, a second participant echoed a high level of perceived support:

> That was probably the best part because everybody that I talked to smiled real big and said that I would be perfect for that…like old coworkers even because they saw how I was with the people at the state school. These guys might be 40 or 50 years old but they had the mentality of a 4-year-old. They were like commenting on my Facebook like you would be perfect for that. My mom loved the idea! In-laws, relatives, and everybody just really loved the idea because they see how I am with my kids and how I am with their kids they just see like I don't know…that I have a connection with kids.

A third participant also had a sense of social support especially from his parents. However, this participant also acknowledges a level of surprise from his friends:

> My mom and dad were very supportive. They say you don't have to do this, is this something you really want to do? Yea, I really want to do it and I told them that I wanted to be a teacher and they said that's fine, we'll support you but if you ever want to change, don't hesitate. If you don't like it, do something else that makes you happy… My friends, they thought I that was something I'd probably do that I'd be good at because I was in high school and always helping others learn and was like you can teach… They were kind of surprised I wanted to be [in] elementary because they never really saw me in that way. They thought I'd be a high school teacher.

Similar to the last participant, there were some levels of surprise echoed by others, especially from their friends and past acquaintances. One participant describes their interaction with their past coaches,

> I went home a while back and saw a couple of my old football coaches and in high school, we were talking… "So, what you're doing?" "I'm at a [university], early childhood to 6th grade. I'm going to try to teach 3rd or 6th grade," and their faces, they gave me that kind of smile 'oh really' and one of them just said: "That was not what we expected you to do." But like I said they had nothing bad to say about it. After the few comments they were like "That's good. We need men in younger level grades. That's admirable." But I think the initial reaction is kind of goofy.

Another participant echoed a level of support and encouragement, but their perception of shock was quite evident. It also seemed that his father was not over-excited about his decision to not pursue something electrical:

> Uh my parents…well my dad especially that I was going to go into electrical engineering because my job in the military was electrical aviation so they thought I was going to go into something relating to the electricity side. They were pretty shocked when I said that I wanted to be a teacher. But they remembered since I was little that I always wanted to be one, so they encouraged me. They didn't tell me not to do it or anything. They have always been very encouraging. They didn't ever want me to be in the military but they were supportive. They actually had to sign my papers to get in because I was under the age of 18.

However, for one particular participant it appears that his mother is quite supportive but his father seemed to be upset about his decision and expected him to be in another career such as law and questioned him "Why do you want to deal with kids? You are so undervalued, underappreciated… I mean you name it I have pretty much heard it." This participant continued:

> My family they…my dad still wants me to be a lawyer. And I was like no. I am too committed at this point. My mom is very supportive of my dad, but my dad just doesn't understand why I want to be a teacher. He just doesn't think that deep down I really want to do this and I try to explain to his that I do but I guess for some reason he just doesn't believe me. … They (friends) think it's great. My grandma, she has always noticed how I always been inclined to kids growing up, always babysitting and being around them. She thought you know I should have been a teacher in the first place. So, she has kind of been the one that has helped me and my confidence going down this road.

Conflicts and Differences within the Program Structure

The third theme that emerged described the conflicts and differences with the university teacher preparation program structure. Participants suggested that there were conflicts between learning environment in the field versus the learning environment in the program. In the field, there seems to be a more conservative slant where males are not allowed to change diapers and escort female students to the restroom while female students are allowed to do both as well as to take male students to the restroom. There also seems to be a feeling of potential loss by making a cross-gendered mistake. Examples mentioned were associated with changing diapers or taking young female students to the restroom. One participant stated,

> Sometimes people think it's kind of weird because I am a male and working with younger kids. I am working the Pre-K one room and I don't change diapers but because I am a male, they never said this but they said I couldn't change diapers. And it was weird, like they didn't put me in a situation where I could change diapers and so I was just like…that made me feel uncomfortable because I was a male, they wouldn't let me do it. I was like I understand but at the same time it is slightly discriminative. But I work in the Pre-K one room and I deal with them sometimes in the potty training sometimes but they don't…it was just weird about the diaper changing.

Similarly, another participant stated, "if I have little girls [who want to go to the bathroom], I am going to have to have another girl teacher like take them to the potty… So, I do take the boys [to the potty] and the girls go with the other teaching

assistant." Another participant suggested that males may be experiencing a layer of anxiety associated with the possibility of making a mistake as he discusses gender and sexuality in schools,

> I feel like people and sexual harassment in schools, that's a big alarm so I feel like when I interact with girls, I should be a little more careful as far as that goes, but I try my best to treat them equally as far as that interaction... cause I see some parents being nervous with me in the classroom with their kids and everything.

Although there were layers of concern about gender and sexuality in the field, the participants responded differently when discussing the university classroom learning environment. Participants responded that they felt supported and encouraged in the classroom learning environment. Data suggested that professors treated all genders equally and were supportive. One participant affirms, "they were always just so supportive…I felt that in the beginning it was just me being insecure but they treated me perfectly like in group projects and stuff like that we did good working together."

Similarly, another participant stated, "I feel that…there's always people to help you. No matter where you go there's someone there that will help you or they will find someone who can help you more" as he was discussing the university teacher preparation program.

While participants echoed the felt-perceptions of equality and support, they also acknowledge a felt-perception of difference. There was acknowledgement that there was a lack of male students so they automatically stand out as a male. One participant stated, "I have noticed that I am one of the only males in the class. And last semester I was the only guy in my classes." Other participants further echoed this feeling, "I guess I feel more singled out in

some instances just being one of two guys in class. I feel like I just stand out a little bit more, good and bad." Male teacher candidates sometimes felt isolated from group activities and interactions due to the limited number of males in the classroom. A third participant stated, "…I am like the only guy. I mean it was just me and that how it was for all my other classes, but she pointed it out. She said good to have you here." Limited number of males in classes can create gender imbalanced nature in the classroom. Describing programmatic gender imbalance, one student stated, "I think it's funny because there's not many guys that want to teach. The most guys I've had in any of my classes that I've been here in an actual teaching class not a core class is like three other than me so that makes it four guys." While one participant made it clear that they do not feel that they were treated any differently, another participant provided a more perplexed statement when he stated, "I don't feel that I am treated different, I might feel like they might expect a little more from me because I am a male and there are a lot of females in the class."

Career Opportunities

The fourth emerging theme was in relation to career opportunities. Participants also acknowledged a very positive feeling about future career opportunities since there are a limited number of male teachers. Participants suggested their very positive feelings in the following ways: One participant stated, "As far as getting a job, I know that male teachers, there's not a lot of them. So, I guess it would be easier to get hired." Similarly, a second participant stated, "So I feel that I would say that in my future career I could get a job more easily that most girls because I am a male and I will be an early education male." Another participant also echoed the advantage of

limited quantity, but expanded to include gendered diversity and fatherly influence when he stated,

> …so, in general there are not that many males. So sometimes we have that advantage because they can provide that fatherly figure to some of these students and help with the diversity of the teacher population and diversity is always an advantage in any company any type of jobs because you have many different minds thinking.

Another participant acknowledges the advantage of limited quantity, but also bridges to the social concerns of males in early childhood education. He explained,

> I have other male friends that finish the program and because they are male many schools want to hire them because there are not that many males. So, I think that is a big advantage and disadvantages…I don't know I would say that sometimes…because you know I told you that sometimes people think it's kind of weird because I am a male and working with younger kids.

Similarly, one participant provided a layer of affirmation when he stated, "male teachers who want to teach those younger grades probably won't get hired because a lot of times parents don't want males around their younger children." Participants from this study acknowledged a level of excitement and optimism while others shared a level of fear and concern. Embedded in the data is an underlying fear of losing job or being seen as potential sexual predators.

Increased Male Representation in Early Childhood Education

The fifth and final theme that emerged from this study was a desire for increased male representation in early childhood education. One participant stated:

I just fell in love with working with those kids, like they just really enjoyed having me there. And when I was there I just realized like the uh… lack of male teachers and like just having a male in the classroom made such a big difference.

Another participant also acknowledged the need for increased male representation when he stated, "I would say be a positive male role model because not all families have those so role model either female or male but to have a strong positive male influence."

Furthermore, participants shared that they were always "the only guy" in the class. This finding strongly highlighted the need to recruit male pre-service teachers in early childhood education programs. One participant explained: "… [it will] help with the diversity of the population and diversity is always an advantage in any company any type of jobs because you have many different minds thinking."

Discussion

This study explored male preservice teachers' experience in a teacher education program in rural, East Texas. The findings indicated that these preservice teachers were passionate about teaching young children. Their career choice was mostly supported by their family members and friends. Male preservice teachers felt equally treated in their university-based teacher education program. There were some limitations within their interactions with young children in the field, which raised some personal concerns. However, the participants seemed to still feel confident about their career choice, and they believe that more male preservice teachers should be recruited.

One important finding from this study is that pre-service male teachers within this group shared their passion in teaching young children. They all want to positively influence young children, provide their students with the most effective instruction, and model masculine, male roles. Identity Theory (Burke & Tully, 1977) explains that male teachers are viewing them as early childhood teachers, they understand the expectations of being early childhood educators and how to perform the teachers' role. This finding is supported by literature that the most important reason why males chooses to become an early childhood educator is because, like most females, they love to work with children and want to make differences in children's lives (Cushman, 2005b; Mulholland & Hansen, 2003). Although salaries for primary teachers are generally low (Cushman, 2000), better salaries would not result in an increase in male teachers (Cameron, 2006; Peeters, 2007). Instead, the findings suggest that more men entering this teaching field because they value the intrinsic reward of satisfaction when working with young children, which are also found in other studies (ie. De Corse &Vogtle, 1997; Gerson, 1993).

Instead of being prejudiced against male pre-service teachers in choosing this profession by their family members and friends (Erden, Ozgun, & Ciftci, 2011), findings from the current study demonstrate overall positive and supportive reactions towards pre-service teachers' career choice. Participants frequently reported that they received supportive reactions from family members when they shared their career choices with them. This finding is support by Stroud, Smith, Ealy, and Hurst (2000) who have also discovered the importance of family support to encourage their choice of profession. Besides parents, other family members, friends, and people who knew them were also reported to be supportive and had strong believes in these male pre-service teachers to be great teachers. This

supportive atmosphere would be crucial to change other people's perceptions towards males working with young children and will help create a gender equality environment in early childhood education. Negative reactions from some fathers and friends demonstrated their perception that males should not be in the early childhood field, which puts males in the out-group as defined in the social identity theory.

Male pre-service teachers in this study were positive about being hired in the future due to the limited number of male teachers in early childhood education field. This is aligned with Stroud, Smith, Ealy and Hurst (2000) who found male pre-service teachers believed that they would get the teaching job easier than their female counterparts. There is also evidence in literature for attracting male teachers to the primary grades (Cushman, 2007; Smith, 2004). Evidence also shows that when there are similar qualifications between a male candidate and a female candidate, 35% of principals in New Zealand would employ the male candidate (Cushman, 2006). There may be a likelihood of men being hired in the primary grade due to the public demand of male role models (Cushman, 2005b) or gender equity (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2003). However, it seems that there is not enough support or advocacy for men teaching young children. Strong leadership is needed to support the gender diversity in early childhood education field.

Gender stereotypes, which have been documented and discussed in literature, have been discovered in conversations with these male pre-service teachers. Participants reported that they were limited in certain activities in the field, such as physically touching a child, taking girls to the bathroom or changing diapers. The main reason is that males are perceived to be suspicious working in the early childhood

environment (Smedley, 2007). It is also well explained by the Social Identity Theory (Hogg & Abrams, 1988) that female identity in early childhood education field makes males the out-group; males received suspicion and prejudice if they want to be in this profession. This gendered stereotype may cause problems for males who want to work in this filed. However, to change such stereotypes against males, considerations towards culture, social beliefs and the mindset of people should be taken into account (Mistry & Sood, 2015). Although it will take time to change public attitudes, we should insist "mindful and persistent renegotiation" (Lumby & Coleman, 2007, p. 96) to ensure gender equity and positive identity development for all genders represented in the field of early childhood education.

It is also necessary to provide "a gender-fair learning environment" that supports all gendered persons working with young children (Cooney& Bittner, 2001, p. 82). Male teachers should not avoid physical contact with children, especially when children need help (Keen, 2003). Further, this is supported by National Association for the Education of Young Children (1996) who say, "No-touch policies are misguided efforts that fail to recognize the importance of touch to children's healthy development. Touch is especially important for infants and toddlers. Warm, responsive touches convey regard and concern for children of any age" (p. 2). Since teaching young children involves a nurturing relationship that physical contact is one part of this relationship, school should create an environment which makes male pre-service teachers feel comfortable interacting with young children.

The male pre-service teachers interviewed in this study felt positive and confident that early childhood education is the right field for them, which is also found

in other research studies (i.e. Thérèsea & Ayşe, 2010). These students have demonstrated a sense of self-efficacy in this profession and they believe they will succeed in this field. They feel comfortable in our program, being fully supported by all professors in their courses, and have not been treated differently or at least uncomfortably by either professors or classmates. Also found in Stroud, Smith, Ealy, and Hurst (2000), males and females were treated equally in the education program. However, male pre-service teachers expressed a needed increase in the number of male pre-service teachers in the teacher education program due to the reason that they sometimes found it hard to fit in with their female counterparts.

A change in perceptions of early childhood teacher being in what is considered women's work is needed. Feminized identities in early childhood education should be addressed through ongoing education and professional development for teacher candidates. It is necessary to provide trainings and resources to enhance the professional identity for male teachers (McMillan & Wash, 2011). Social networks and publicity efforts should be emphasized on changing people's perceptions that males can also be effectively working with young children. Childcare centers and facilities should be more gender inclusive and attractive to male teachers. Leadership with strong emphasis on gender equality is necessary to facilitate the change of public attitudes and perceptions and the advocacy in recruiting male teachers in early childhood education field.

For teacher education programs, essential courses on gender equity should be included. Males should be trained appropriately for caring young children in dealing with gender-related issues. Professional trainings or seminars to address

stereotypes about male teachers in early childhood education and to address various ethical situations and classroom safety should be included in teacher education programs. Case studies and research-based studies on successful male elementary teachers should be used to provide models for pre-service male teachers. Also, it is indicated in the findings that the construction of mentoring programs and/or support groups to create space for male pre-service teachers to sort through various issues related to the male experience is highly needed. Within the field, male teacher candidates should also be provided with equal opportunities to practice during the field experiences and student teaching. It is equally important to support male teachers in their job and make sure they are satisfied (Garret, 1999).

Limitations and Future Research

It is acknowledged that there are some limitations in this study. The first limitation is the relatively small number of male participants. Second, this research took place in a teacher education program in rural, East Texas. Therefore, the results should be treated with caution and cannot be generalized into a large population and in different locations.

There is varied importance of this study. Limited prior research and data provides a pathway for new understanding. The findings from this study identifies that male students feel supported from family, friends, and the classroom experiences of the program. The early childhood teacher education programs can build upon this to recruit male students and further engage male students to engage in the field. Also, the findings identify that male students feel gendered limitations in their field placement interactions. It is necessary to encourage field-placement coordinators to advance

beyond traditional, conservative perspectives and to assist the community to move beyond the limitations created by these perspectives. For this particular teacher preparation program, there seems to be conflicting differences between classroom experiences and field experiences. They might need to align the teaching practices to avoid these conflicts. Overall, comprehensive strategies are needed to change people's perceptions feminization of early childhood education. Gender diversity and gender balance in early childhood education should be continuously advocated and emphasized in our society to develop new perspectives in early childhood education profession.

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