

Learning Experiences of Male Pre-service Preschool Teachers in Taiwan

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Abstract

Background: The percentage of male teachers in preschools in Taiwan is very low, and thus they have become the disadvantaged minority in preschool teacher training classrooms. Consequently, it is worth investigating the experience of such individuals, and whether the training they receive is both appropriate and adequate. Specifically, should they be taught with teaching methods that are more suited to their educational backgrounds? Or do they have to passively accept the concept that 'real' preschool teachers are female?

Aims: The aims of this study are to explore the reasons why males decide to study early childhood care, and to discuss their learning experiences.

Sample: Three male pre-service preschool teachers in Taiwan were selected as the research subjects for this study.

Method: The data collected for this study included records from official and unofficial interviews and observation notes, to which content analysis was applied.

Results: The main reasons why males are willing to enter the realm of preschool education include to start their own business and to get a degree, but interest in the topic itself is not a motivating factor. In their learning experiences, they tend to constantly doubt the value of their jobs as preschool teachers. However, if these men are able to re-position their jobs and develop second specialties, their learning attitudes can become more positive, and they can start to enjoy their careers.

Conclusion: There are far more female than male professionals in the field of preschool education. It is thus necessary to provide male preschool teachers with appropriate levels of support, so that they can feel both confident and appreciated in their work, as they still often face considerable resistance from the wider society.

Keywords: Male Pre-service Preschool Teachers, Male Learning Experiences.

台灣男性職前幼兒教師的學習經驗探究

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摘要

背景：台灣幼兒園中男教師的比例極低。在幼教師資培育的課室裡，男性亦是極少數的弱勢。當「性別」成為課室結構之不平衡時，傳統的幼兒教師培育課程對男性學習者是否具週延性？是否考量到男性學習者的學習成長背景，而給予適切之教學，亦或仍以「幼兒教師等於女性教師」的思維方式，使課室中的弱勢男性只能沉默接受？

目的：本研究之目的在探討職前男性幼兒教師就讀幼保系之原因，及其學習經驗的發展。

調查對象：本研究以台灣三位職前男性幼兒教師為研究對象。

調查方法：本研究之資料蒐集為正式及非正式訪談之語料、觀察札記等方式進行。資料分析則採用內容分析法。

調查結果：男性進入幼教領域之原因為：為創業或只想取得學歷，並非因興趣而就讀。男性的學習經驗中，即不斷地自我質疑幼兒教師的工作價值，並在社會觀感、性別刻板印象的排斥中，得過且過地消極學習；之後，因對幼教工作重新定位，並培養第二專長，學習態度轉趨積極，為幼教職場另闢一扇窗。

總結：在以女性為主體的幼教職場中，不僅要解構以女性為主體的規範，更須在師資培育過程中，檢視男性幼兒教師是如何被定位，及如何自我定位。協助未來的幼兒教師找尋「專業承諾」，樹立幼兒教師的專業認同。

關鍵詞：職前男性幼兒教師、男性學習經驗

INTRODUCTION

According to the statistics from the Ministry of Education in Taiwan (2009), on around 1.13% of preschool teachers are male. One obvious question is thus whether this very low percentage has an influence on male teachers' learning and their intentions to continue working in this field? The following subsections explain some of the background and motivation for this research:

Preschool teachers = female teachers?

Before 1969, preschool teachers in Taiwan were essentially all women, as in law it was stated that "in principle, this job should be taken by a female". However, why, forty years later, do women still hold the vast majority of jobs in this field? Farquhar (1997) believed that concerns about hiring possible offenders were behind the widespread public feeling that this job should be taken by women. In addition, she stated the men holding such jobs were often perceived as either homosexuals or in other ways not 'real men'. Consequently, for men working as pre-school teacher, it is a job that entails both low pay and low esteem. As the disadvantaged minority in this field, men stay away from these so-called "jobs for women" (Wang, 1996).

Male teachers have to carry the burden of meeting the traditional image of manhood, which makes it difficult for them to step into the field of preschool education (Chang, 2003), as it seen as a low-paying, feminine job, and as such there is even some public resistance to their taking this role. However, since a number of men do study preschool education, it is worth investigating their experiences during this process.

Childhood is the key period of the development of roles of different genders. It's also a very important period to develop children's gender-cognition and to learn the behaviors of different genders (Wu, 2000.

Chung, 2006). With the participation of males in the preschool education field, children would have different subjects to observe or imitate. This way, an environment with no gender discrimination can be created to promote male children's self-concepts (Riley, Holmes, Cornwell, & Blume, 1985; Seifert, 1986; Harris, & Barnes, 2009). Therefore, the participation of males in the preschool education jobs can not only help children's learning and development in their early stages, but also provide them interactions different from the ones they have with female teachers.

Voice of the disadvantaged learners and the self-conscious-raising

Although males dominate many professional fields, this is not true of preschool education (Chien, 2000), in which they are a disadvantaged minority. As such, are traditional, female-oriented training class adequate or appropriate for male learners? Specifically, should they be taught with teaching methods that are more suited to their educational backgrounds? Or do they have to passively accept the concept that 'real' preschool teachers are female?

Belenky, Clinchy, Golderberg, and Tarule (1986) stated that teachers should help students be aware of their own strengths and abilities to speak out and express their ideas, and thus we hope that pre-service male preschool teachers who have been marginalized will be able to improve their status in training courses. The findings of this research can serve as a reference for decision makers who plan preschool teacher training, and the specific research questions considered are as follows:

- Why did the men surveyed decide to study preschool education?
- What did male develop preschool teachers' learning experiences?

METHODS

Participants

The purpose of this study was to explore pre-service preschool male teachers' learning experiences, and thus the subjects were selected from the Department of Early Childhood Care at a university in southern Taiwan, where the researcher serves as a teacher. In the academic year 2007~2008, there were 1.6% of male students in the department, and three of them qualified as participants, since they met the following conditions:

- They were not in the researcher's class during the interview period, as this may have biased their responses.
- They were interested in the topic of this study, and were willing to cooperate with regard to both the interviews and observations.
- They were all senior students, and thus had more learning experiences than other possible subjects. Moreover, they had all already taught as practice teachers.

The early childhood care learning experience of the three participants was as follows. S1(first student) attended a three-year early childhood care program at a vocational high school and technological high school, and he was the only male student studying this subject at both schools. At the time of the interview for this research, he had already studied in the university's department of early childhood care for seven years, with three periods of teaching in kindergartens. The interview was conducted in the second semester of his fourth year at the university, which was a period of time when he was facing a turning point in his life, deciding on his future career.

Neither S2 (second student) nor S3 (third student) majored in early childhood care while studying at vocational high school, but entered the field in university.

After the aims of the research had been explained and their consent obtained, the three participants were interviewed and observed in their teaching. In order to avoid any adverse effects on their academic career, the researcher chose not to publish this study until all three individuals had graduated.

Data collection

The data collected for this research included both formal and informal interview content and observation notes, and content analysis was performed on the material gathered.

In order to ensure reliability, triangulation was performed, and the researcher (R1) provided the data for analysis to another professor (co-researcher R2) with a similar professional background for review of the analysis results and to make adjustments as necessary. The participants then further confirmed the results of the analysis.

Every participant was interviewed 2~4 times, 1~2 hours per interview, according to the schedules of the researcher and the subjects, and the completeness of data being collected.

Processing

The interview data were analyzed using a thematic, qualitative approach. Initially, the learners' accounts were examined for key biographical data about important life events, transitions and social contexts. As described below, a re-examination of the data then went beyond the 'face value' of the narratives and endeavored to address closely the ways in which the information was told or presented.

The recordings of the interviews and observations were written out as verbatim transcriptions, and their serial numbers are based on the following system, (code, number of interview, year, month, date), so that (S12071212-i) stands for the second interview of S1 on 2007/12/12, while (S212070908-o) stands for the first observation of S2 on 2007/09/08.

RESULTS

Q1 : Why did the men decide to study preschool education?

To open a business rather than to follow their ambition or interest

S1 had studied “preschool education department” since his vocational high school years, and had already had seven years of related learning experience by the time the interviews were conducted. S1 actually decided to pursue this career due to a comment from his mother, who told him that “you can make a lot of money out of it.” This made him decide to transfer his studies from mechanical engineering to early childhood care. All the way he’d felt natural and right.

... Back then (first year in the vocational high school), my major was mechanical engineering... My mom said that if I could become a principal of a kindergarten, my future would be promising since parents are usually very willing to spend money on their children. That’s why she asked me to transfer...(S11070423-i)

During the three years in the vocational high school, S1 did not have any trouble fitting in. After practicing in a kindergarten during his junior college years, he finally understood that things were not as easy as he had anticipated. Without funds, it is not possible to start a business.

... when I first experienced practicing in a school. I realized that the competition was intense. Being a kindergarten principal was not as easy as I expected. To have my own kindergarten, I need licenses and a lot of money. ... Right, it was not what I thought it would be. And even though I could open a kindergarten, it doesn’t

guarantee that I would make money. With that kind of competition, I started to give this walk of life a second thought. (S11070423-i)

S1 did not enter this field for his ambitions or interest, but only to open his own business. During interview with this student, he repeatedly expressed concern about his choice of career, asking questions such as “Can I make money out of it?” or “Can I support my family with that job?”. From the interviews it was also clear that he felt that males were superior to females, and thus that there was some shame in being a female-dominated occupation.

Chen’s (2001) research into the life histories of male elementary school teachers notes the following:

Since ancient times, males who pursue fame and honor and try to obtain a higher position are the ones being considered as with achievements. An elementary school teacher, a job like a nanny, cannot meet the society’s expectation of males. (Chen, 2001, p132)

Lortie (1975, cited in Lin, 1990) believed the reasons that there are more female teachers than male ones are: 1) Traditionally it is believed that teachers are the best jobs for women; 2) Parents usually interfere with their sons’ career choices more than their daughters’, and generally they consider being a teacher as a more appropriate job for females.

From studying an easy subject to wanting a career

In contrast to S1, who chose preschool education as his major because he wanted to open a business, S2 and S3 decided to study this subject because they had been told that it was easy.

It was very hard in the vocational high school (electrical engineering major) back then. I’d almost given up several times...

Some senior classmate told me early childhood care is much easier. So I chose it. (S22070911-i)

Anyway, all I wanted was a bachelor's degree. Early childhood care seemed to be easy. A senior classmate in our gym class said it'd be fine. (S31070911-i)

Although it was not their original intention, during their training both individuals decided to pursue careers as preschool teachers.

I thought I could just do the minimum and graduate. But after the practice, I found that kindergartens had a lack of gym teacher. I saw gym teachers taking several jobs in different kindergartens and making good money. I decided that this is what I want to do in the future. (S31070911-i)

...I am good at gym. So I will consider becoming a gym teacher. ... (S22070911-i)

S2 and S3 didn't plan to become professional preschool teachers. But after being in the field for a certain time, and seeing the possibility of getting a good job their attitude of "I just want a degree" had changed.

Q2: What did male develop preschool teachers' learning experiences?

As described above, the reasons why the male subjects chose early childhood care as their major were to make money or get an easy degree, which were quite different from those of their female counterparts, who stated reasons such as "loving children". Therefore, with their different learning motivations, it is expected that the learning experiences of male and female preschool teachers would also be different.

Female thinking with regard to curriculum design

Sadker and Sadker (1994) indicated that, in classrooms with both males and females, female university students participate less often in discussions than elementary school and junior high school female students. Moreover, the frequency of teachers' interactions with students differs with gender. Generally, male students are more favored, because teachers have higher expectations for them than for female ones (Chang & Chen, 1997; Pan, 1998). In other words, school education, especially university education, is better for male students' development. But is the same true in preschool education classrooms? According to the interviews with the participants, most preschool teachers are female. Therefore, when teacher trainers design curriculums, they rarely consider the differences between males and females.

...When I was in high school, I found making teaching aids very difficult. I had to finish on school assignment every week. I couldn't take it... For example, a week, the assignment was to make a nonwoven doll, and I had to do it. I was not used to that. And back then everything needed to be protected by tapes. I felt very frustrated... (S12070607-i)

"Males cannot make teaching aids attentively" might be another thought with gender-prejudice impression. But the traditional teaching method makes teachers play a role of authority with knowledge in the learning process. And students are the silent knowledge receiver. A classroom as a "libratory environment" where both teachers and students can participate in, and everyone there is a subject, not an object (Shrewsbury, 1987; Gore, 1992). Therefore, unlike the traditional image,

teachers are no longer the only owners and providers of knowledge. As Freire (1993) said, it's more like collaborations with student-teachers and teacher-students to complete communication and knowledge construction.

As males are the minority in the classroom, teacher trainers should pay more attention to these disadvantaged learners, and enable them to feel secure in voicing their misgivings.

“Teaching aid making” is the most frustrating course for male students (S21070909-o). Does that mean teacher trainers should have a different interpretation of the words “teaching aids”?

Social expectations

Some occupations are traditionally associated with one gender, and thus, in Taiwan, whoever takes a job as a preschool teacher is thought of as feminine. Moreover, the low pay associated with this job is another factor that deters men from accepting it.

...In fact, male teachers are needed in kindergartens. Because males and females are still quite different... But the truth is, that job doesn't pay well, and people might say that I am good for nothing. (S13070923-i)

Although S1 had already spent seven years in the department of preschool education, he did not want to pursue this career. It's undeniable that the “social expectations” influenced his feelings about this (S12070923-o).

... When I was in the department of early childhood care, I was afraid to tell people about it. I was worried that they might have laughed at me. Now I don't feel that way. (S31070911-i)

Although the three participants did not clearly

state any reasons why being in the department of preschool education is a bad thing, the statement that “other people may laugh at me” suggests their real feelings. Thus, in the process of learning, they tried to look for business opportunities simply because “teaching kids” is not a job for real men (Allan, 1993).

When male preschool teachers are being trained, they may be oppressed because of the trainers' own judgments. Teachers are important with regard to constructing a safe environment for conversation to encourage introspective discussions in classrooms (Chung, 2001; Thompson, 1995). As Lewis and Simon said, it is important to include “reflexive turn” in an open pedagogy (Chung, 2001; Thompson, 1995). To apply “reflexive turns” in the preschool teacher training course means to destroy the historical female subject of the basic principle of truth, also to produce knowledge with male being the subject. In other words, male characteristics in the training courses of preschool teachers should be “seen” instead of covered, which leads to the fact that they become silent and not be able to learn and to introspect as they are suppose to.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study explores how males in preschool teacher training courses construct their self-knowledge and raise their consciousness in classrooms, where they represent a small minority. As the results show, due to traditional social ideas, these male learners have a number of problems.

Taiwan Ministry of Education did not regulate the teacher who teaching in University must abide by rule. Teacher trainers should thus make more efforts to include males in their classes, and to alter the curriculum, if necessary.

From interviews with children, Harris and Barnes

(2009) found that children's learning effectiveness is not influenced by the gender of teachers. Although this result is different from the findings of researchers from Taiwan (Wu, 2000; Chung, 2006), that children's learning experiences differ with the gender of teachers, Wen (2005) indicates that Taiwanese parents and kindergarten supervisors wish that more males would join this profession.

Learning experience: from “seeing things as they are” to “seeing the meaning behind things”

Few males choose to be preschool teachers. The situation is similar in countries of different conditions (Ministry of Education, 2009; Russo & Feder, 2001; Harris, & Barnes, 2009). Males' learning experiences are different from females due to the social conception and gender images. They gradually develop their own learning experiences from the career options. The development is from “seeing things as they are” to “seeing the meaning behind things”.

The department of preschool education has become a “*female department*”. Males can hardly find their positions in learning. Even the S1, who had been in the department for 7 years, said something like “*males are not so attentive*” and “*I can't make money with that*”. This kind of “seeing things as they are” makes males feel bored. They want to run away from learning or just despise it. This “female department” gives them the idea that they would be doing women's job in the future.

Field practice is the turning point to turn “*seeing things as they are*” to “*seeing the meaning behind things*”. It can be found from the interviews that when males think of this department as a female department, they'd lose the power to learn. But in the field practice, they can experience something

different and combine their second specialty with preschool education, expecting to become gym teachers who understand kids or a magician. S1 said bluntly “*many magicians don't understand kids, I do!*” while S2 and S3 said “*many kindergartens are in need of gym teachers*”. When they interpreted the department of preschool education from different angles, it's not a female department anymore.

After all, in a learning environment with females being the majority, the transformation from “seeing things as they are” to “seeing the meaning behind things” is connected to the position of gender differences. From learners' angle, they must review how they are positioned in a social structure; review the relations between what they've learned, and the relations with others, and how they are influenced by the social and political power during the process of knowledge construction. When males review the positioning of their gender role, they don't interpret “preschool teachers” as “jobs for women” and can think about their positions from different angles with different career options. This is an important factor to help males transform their attitudes and methods.

The social conception and gender images depend on the specification of “positions”, to reach the “still seeing thing as they are” state. Otherwise, parents, colleagues, supervisors, and future families are all important links in males' decision of staying in the preschool education. Therefore, in the preschool, females being the majority, it is important to not only deconstruct the regulations with females being the subjects as the norm to judge others, but also review how preschool male teachers are positioned and how they position themselves in the conversation of modern liberation.

Otherwise, the male pre-service preschool teachers' self-confident establishments are also an important

key. Just like, Teo and Schaik (2009) said, when pre-service teachers find technology useful and easy to use, they tend to develop positive feelings (liking) towards. The sum, in the realm of preschool education, females is the majority. However, not only the rules for females shall be deconstructed, in the process of cultivating teachers, how male preschool teachers are positioned and how they see themselves shall also be taken into account, so that in the future, preschool teachers can find “professional promises” and establish professional cognition for preschool teachers.

Participates of this study include three pre-service preschool male teachers. Similar cases can be analyzed by analogy, but it cannot be inferred to others. Of course, if the participates’ families and classmates can be studied to explore the deeper learning experience; it can be used for future reference. In addition, this study was analyzed from the Feminist Pedagogy’s point of view, and the reasons and experiences are all from subjects’ own description. In future studies, it is suggested that more researches can be done according to theories such as “objective orientation” or “learners’ intrinsic and extrinsic motivations”. The result might be different.

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