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Gender Stereotyping in the Eyes of Preschool Teachers and Teacher Candidates

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to discover what male preschool teachers and preschool teacher candidates face in the field of early childhood education. It was a qualitative study involving interviews with 10 volunteers: Five were preschool teachers and five were preschool teacher candidates. Four main themes emerged from the results: responses of participants' parents, difficulties at the university, difficulties in the profession, and prejudices of children's parents. The results of the study also showed the following: (a) Teachers faced gender stereotypes, and teacher candidates believed they would eventually face them; and (b) if male teacher candidates could not perform their jobs easily or if they experienced any difficulty, they and their parents thought pursuing careers as a vice-principal or principal at a school was an acceptable option.

Keywords: early childhood education, male teachers, bias

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Introduction

Gender roles are roles and responsibilities that place a burden on women and men based on cultural, social, economic, and historical reasons notwithstanding the biological differences between women and men. Sex is determined biologically; however, gender and gender roles are cultural constructs that children learn at their mothers' knees. Choosing blue for baby boys and pink for baby girls reflects an unnatural differentiation about the capabilities of men and women (Üner, 2008). Showing boys playing with guns and girls playing with dolls in visual media reinforces the differentiation (Gündüz-Kalan, 2010). Biased gender roles like men as breadwinners and women as homemakers and mothers affect the choice of profession as well as the representation of women and men in specific jobs, often preventing women from choosing professions like politics and business and men from choosing teaching, nursing, and midwifery.

The most critical obstacles to gender mainstreaming provided under the law are the gender stereotypes that exist in the minds of individuals. Stereotypes, which are the overly simplified images that people create in their minds about situations, phenomena, and objects, play an important role in comprising prejudices over time. They emerge during the childhood years at home and later consolidate and become internalized at school and in society (Kalaycı, 2015).

One stereotype involves childcare as the responsibility of women or men. In almost all societies childcare and housework are accepted as the responsibilities of women and earning a living to

support the family is left to men. Thus, women's professional choices may be limited to teaching and nursing (Esen & Bađlı, 2002). Based solely on gender, people persist in thinking that women are better caretakers than men (Noddings, 1984; Peeters, Rohrmann, & Emilsen, 2015). People tend to believe that women are by nature better at teaching and caring for small children in traditional settings, a commonly held sentiment (Cunningham & Dorsey, 2004; Sanders, 2002).

Preschool teaching is a job subject to these prejudices. People believe that because women are responsible for childcare, a preschool teacher should be a woman. When they encounter male preschool teachers, they react negatively (Tennhoff, Nentwich & Vogt, 2015). Male teachers have stated that they have perceived negative reactions from parents (Temiz & Cin, 2017). Because mothers are primarily responsible for childcare and upbringing in a society, parents typically expect to see a female teacher in the classrooms of their young children. In addition, mothers prefer to communicate with female teachers. In many societies, the perception of men's inability to care for young children and the low status of preschool teachers prevent men from choosing preschool teaching as a profession.

By contrast, researchers of gender equality have emphasized the importance of both female and male teachers in early childhood education. The most agreed upon advantage of men as preschool teachers is that men offer children the experiences needed for a well-rounded education (Ahmad, Al-Zboon, Fankhour Alkhaldeh, & Al Khatib, 2018). The perception of male teachers could be positively affected by support from mothers, female preschool teachers, and the community (Drudy, 2008; Sak, Şahin, & Şahin, 2012; Thornton, 1999). Such support would also provide men with confidence in their work (Fu & Li, 2010). In addition, education administrators could encourage male teachers by providing diversity (Ahmad et al., 2018). Students educated at schools where both female and male teachers worked together developed fewer gender-based stereotypes (Vendrell, Capdevila, Dalmau, Geis, & Ciller, 2014). Thus, preschool educational institutions can play a key role in preventing or eliminating gender stereotypes if more male teachers are hired to teach in them.

Male early childhood education teachers are generally perceived negatively (Akman, Taşkın, Ozden, Okyay, & Cortu, 2014; Barış, 2013); nevertheless, the number of male preschool teachers has increased despite the domination by women in the field (Cameron, 2001; Sandberg, Pramling-Samuelsson, 2005; Sumsion, 2005) and the belief by family and friends that a male preschool teacher is strange or unusual (Cohen, 1992; Skelton, 1991; Sumsion, 2000). Studies on gender equality have shown the importance of male preschool teachers in child development, but the percentage of preschool male teachers has remained low around the world. In Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development countries most teachers are women, especially at the preschool and elementary levels (Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development [OECD], 2015). The low percentage of male preschool teachers can be explained by the commonly held idea that men are less suitable for childcare (Heikkilä & Hellman, 2017). Following are some statistics from around the world, where about 3% of preschool teachers are men (Brody, 2015; Heikkilä & Hellman, 2017). The percentage of male teachers in early childhood education reached 2.2% in New Zealand (Morrison, 2014), 2.3% in the US (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2011), and 6% in Japan (Taguma, Litjens & Makowiecki, 2012). Studies in Norway, Denmark, and Turkey showed that men constituted 5% of the teacher population, but in most other countries the male teacher population was less than 3% (Oberhuemer, Schreyer, & Neuman, 2010; OECD, 2014). Norway has the highest rate with 9% (Peeters, 2007). The rates were similar in Turkey, where the

rate of male preschool teachers is 5.34% according to 2014 National Education Statistics. The number of female preschool teachers was 59,940, and the number of male preschool teachers was 3,387. In order to increase the rate of preschooling in Turkey, preschool education became compulsory in 32 cities in the 2009–2010 academic year (Tüm Gazeteler, 2009). Despite the increase in both the level of schooling required and the number of male preschool teachers in the field, most of them are still women.

These rates have demonstrated that the representation of men among preschool teachers is still very low. Around the world these low rates have shown that gender stereotyping in early childhood education is a global issue; nevertheless, with the rise of single-parent homes, blended and multigenerational families, and homes where both parents work, the debate that has arisen relates to children, particularly boys, needing male role models (Weaver-Hightower, 2011). Many young children have little contact with men on a regular basis and know only what they see in the media—violent or angry men, not nurturing, thoughtful men (Piburn, Nelson, & Carlson, 2011). Young children, whose identity will be shaped by what they see around them, need to see examples of caring men around them; this is especially important for young boys.

In this context the stereotyping of male preschool teachers continues, and current male preschool teachers face many obstacles while performing their jobs. In this study these obstacles will be elaborated. The purpose of this study was to discover what male preschool teachers and preschool teacher candidates face in the field of early childhood education.

Previous Studies

A study of the changes in teacher training institutions over time in Turkey and the roles female teachers have performed in Turkish history showed not only the fault in the perception that teaching is a woman's job but also the job pressures women face in male-dominated societies (Yılmaz, 2015).

Studies have also shown that male preschool teachers face prejudices: Some have stated that they face the suspicion of being child molesters (Penn, 1996). In addition, male teacher candidates' parents had inadequate knowledge of the profession, so they were biased against their sons becoming preschool teachers; the teacher candidates also stated that their parents thought that this was women's work (Erden, Ozgun, & Aydılek-Çiftçi, 2011). A traditional discriminatory approach toward male preschool male teachers exists in Turkey (Anlıak & Beyazkürk, 2008). Teachers said that parents held gender stereotypes regarding men as early childhood teachers (Temiz & Cin, 2017); furthermore, gender stereotypes surrounding male early childhood teachers were entrenched in society (Şahin, Korkmaz, & Çoban, 2018).

Some studies done with parents of children supported the idea of stereotypes surrounding male preschool teachers. Mothers have been shown to want female teachers to teach their children because they think that females will “mother” them (Mukuna & Mutsotso, 2012). A study on parental attitudes toward men as preschool teachers demonstrated parents' agreement on male teachers in the profession; however, parents also thought that the profession is difficult for men to enter (Rentzou, 2011). By contrast, a study done with teachers working in early childhood education and professors showed that most of the participants wanted to see more male preschool teachers in the field (Farquhar, 2012). A study in Pakistan showed that gender roles for boys and

girls were established at a very young age, and the lack of presence of male teachers reinforced the idea that school is not the place for grown men to work. The culture influenced what was viewed as a gender-appropriate career. Female teachers in a Pakistani school reinforced the notion of patriarchal dominance, in which boys are assertive and girls are passive (Pardhan & Pelletier, 2017).

In contrast with negative results about the perception of male early childhood teachers, some positive gender stereotypes have emerged. Researchers discovered that no one of either gender found men in the education field unacceptable (Mukuna & Mutsotso, 2012; Robinson, Skeen, & Coleman, 1984). Another study showed parents at one school preferred to send their children to a mixed-gender school as a show of support for gender equality (Cameron, Moss, & Owen, 1999). A neutral perception of the presence of men as preschool teachers rather than a strong opposition to their presence has also been found (Ahmad et al., 2018).

Significance of the Study

Many studies have revealed that children need both female and male role models in school (Carrington, Tymms, & Merrell, 2008; Martino, 2008; Rice & Goessling, 2005; Silverstein & Auerbach, 1999; Sokal, Katz, Chaszewski, & Wojcik, 2007; White, 2011); however, because of the stereotypes held in communities, men do not want to choose professions like teaching and nursing. Even though perceptions of the people opposing male teachers and nurses have changed, men are still hesitant to choose the profession because of the low salary and status as well as the prejudice against male teachers (Wardle, 2003).

An analysis of the literature showed that gender stereotypes in society related to professions, but the research primarily focused on in-service nurses or nurse candidates. Fewer studies had been conducted with male early childhood teacher candidates; especially lacking were qualitative studies on this issue, necessitating a study to provide an in-depth analysis of the educational lives of teacher candidates and their expectations about their professional lives.

Many studies have been done with parents and students about prejudices and perceptions surrounding male preschool teachers. To gain a deep insight, a study involving male schoolteachers and male teacher candidates is needed. Some scholars recommended interviewing male schoolteachers to acquire a deeper understanding of their reasons for choosing the profession as well as the advantages and disadvantages accompanying the job (Ahmad et al., 2018). The importance of the current study is that it adds to an understanding of male preschool teachers' and teacher candidates' experiences as men in early childhood education.

Methods

This section includes the method of the study, the sample, data collection, and data analysis. A qualitative approach was selected for this study to provide a deep understanding of participants. Interviewing, which is typical in qualitative research, was used.

Sample

Snowball sampling, a purposive sampling method, was used to determine the samples for the study (Yıldırım & Simsek, 2013). It is a convenience sampling method often applied when accessing

subjects with the target characteristics is difficult. This technique involves existing study subjects recruiting future subjects among their acquaintances; then sampling continues until data saturation occurs (Naderifar, Goli, & Ghaljaie, 2017). In this method, the researcher asks the first few samples, who are usually selected via convenience sampling, if they know anyone with similar views or situations to take part in the research. It is an efficient and cost-effective means to access people who would otherwise be very difficult to find (Polit-O'Hara & Beck, 2006). In the current study, the researcher knew only one male preschool teacher, so he was asked to recruit future volunteers.

A total of 10 volunteers participated in the study, five of whom were preschool teachers and five were preschool teacher candidates. Consent forms were signed, and pseudonyms (indicated below by initials) were assigned to all participants to protect their identities. Five teacher candidate participants were freshmen in the Early Childhood Education Department at a state university in Turkey. Five preschool teacher participants were working as preschool teachers in Turkey. Two had worked in early childhood education for five years, one for three years, one for two years, and one for one year. They worked in the following cities: Van, Diyarbakır, Trabzon, Konya, and Afyon.

Data Collection

To understand the obstacles faced by male preschool teachers and teacher candidates throughout their education and in their working environments as men in a profession dominated by women, in-depth interviews were conducted. Semi structured interview forms, related to the overall and subobjectives of the study, were developed. Interviews were done in Turkish since the participants are Turkish citizens and translated by the researcher later. Interviews lasted for 20 minutes and were audiotaped with the permission of participants. Transcription, translation, and analysis of the audio recordings were done. Interview forms and audio records were evaluated by two experts.

Data Analysis

The transcriptions and translations of the audio recordings were read three times by the researcher, after which some emerging themes and major trends were identified. Free coding and focused coding methods were used to draw out some basic themes. Following the analysis of data, three experts evaluated the categories and themes. Before settling on these themes, participants were asked whether their intent has been captured. After the approval of participants about their transcripts and their intent, data analysis ended, and the researcher began redaction.

Results and Findings

The findings of the study appear in this section. Four main themes emerged from the results: responses of participants' parents, difficulties at the university, difficulties in the profession, and prejudices of children's parents. The themes appear below supported by the participants' statements.

Responses of Participants' Parents

Most of the participants stated that their parents' responses to their chosen professions were positive. GA said, "My parents responded positively. Since they know that appointments at this level of the profession are easier to get than other levels in teaching, I received positive responses." BE said, "My parents always back me up, and they respected my decision about this and others and stated that they will support me always." Participants stated the reason for parents' positive reactions was the high appointment possibility in the early childhood education field.

Some participants mentioned that distant relatives had negative reactions to their entering early childhood education. GA said, "Sometimes I was asked by distant relatives and friends whether males prefer this profession or not." Although most of the parents reacted positively, two participants stated that their parents warned them against being an early education teacher. RA said, "They asked me if I would be able to succeed in this profession or not. They told me that it is difficult to deal with children and that if I thought I would not succeed, I should not enter this profession. If I thought I would not be able to do well, they suggested I become a vice-principal of a school instead of an early childhood teacher." SI said, "They questioned whether a male can be an early education teacher or not and asked why I chose this profession." Both teacher candidates and teachers had similar ideas and experiences about parents' reactions. Little difference in the views of students and teachers emerged.

Difficulties at the University

Both teacher candidates and teachers were asked whether they had or currently experienced difficulties at the university because so many women were enrolled in the department and the number of men was limited. Student candidates stated that they were the only five male students in the class of a total of 33 students. Others stated that they were only two of 26 students in the program. Thus, they were asked whether they experienced problems as male students when the majority were women and the perception in Turkish society was that women are better at teaching preschool.

Most of the participants stated that they had not faced any problems in their early childhood education departments, and they credited the faculty members' approaches. SI said, "I haven't had any difficulties because our instructors supported male students." By contrast, some participants stated that they faced difficulties in their early childhood education departments because the profession was dominated by women and most students were women. CE said, "There wasn't a problem in general; however, in our society, early childhood teaching is seen as a job for women, and I faced many questions about this issue." Two of the participants stated that they had difficulties in arts and crafts courses. GA said, "Especially in courses that necessitate artistic ability, I had many difficulties. I also had some difficulties with art education courses, but I did not have any difficulties in basic courses." RA added, "I have difficulty when something is done related to art because my art abilities are lower than girls."

Difficulties in the Profession

Teacher candidates believed that they would face gender problems when they entered the profession. All the participants stated that they had faced the gender issue in the profession because

of the perception in society that women are better at early childhood education than men. Teacher SA said, “The prejudices of parents that I encountered at our first meeting caused stress as I started in the profession; however, I have continued to try to create a positive perception.” SI also faced gender issues and said, “At first, mothers hesitated when they heard that a male teacher was coming to the school, but over time they got used to this idea. Most of the students continue to attend the school, and some parents want to send their kids without even registering.” Teacher candidate VE stated that the gender issue is a general problem in the society that can also be found in other professions. He said, “Parents approaching male teachers with prejudices and preferring female teachers is a problem, but this is not only a problem in early childhood education. It is same in other professions, such as nursing, midwifery, etc.”

Along with the gender issue, both teacher and teacher candidates stated another problem they faced or will face in early childhood education: general apathy toward early childhood education, especially in rural areas. Teacher candidate GO speculated about the cause of this apathy: “People in rural areas might see early childhood education as unnecessary or less important than other aspects of education.” Teachers mentioned that another problem they faced was parents’ apathy toward early childhood education in general.

Prejudices of Children’s Parents

The participants were asked whether they faced or would face the gender prejudice of parents in the profession. Teacher candidates stated that they did not think they would face gender bias, but teachers said that they had initially faced such prejudice.

Teacher candidates believed that a general gender prejudice surrounded early childhood education; however, it could be eliminated easily. RA said, “Yes, prejudice is apparent, but I believe that over time people will react normally to men in the early childhood classroom. Although women are mother models, men should be father models for children.” FE added, “I believe that prejudices can be eliminated through efforts by teachers and schools.”

Teacher candidates believed that some prejudices might exist but that this is a general belief in society; teachers stated that they faced gender prejudices during the first years of their profession. CE said, “Yes, especially in the beginning, it happens; but later most of them [parents] changed their opinions. Of course, I still have parents who have the same attitudes and prejudices.” SI added, “At first, when mothers heard that a male teacher had come to the school, they hesitated; but later they grew accustomed to it.” Participants also stated that they overcame the gender issue with their own hard work. GO said, “Unfortunately, in our society, some professions are identified by gender. In our profession a belief exists that early childhood education teachers should be women. I faced these prejudices, but I overcame this issue through parent education, parent visits, and self-promotion.” SA said, “Of course, at first parents had prejudices, but those prejudices disappear when you engage in positive communication with parents and make a positive commitment to children.”

Conclusion and Discussion

This study represents an attempt to examine gender stereotypes in early childhood education. To discover what male preschool teachers and teacher candidates faced in early childhood education,

five male in-service early childhood teachers and five male early childhood teacher candidates were interviewed. Future researchers should interview more male schoolteachers to gain a deeper understanding of their reasons for choosing the profession as well as the advantages and disadvantages of having male teachers in preschool classrooms (Ahmad et al., 2018).

The results of this study showed that teachers face gender stereotypes and teacher candidates believed that they would face them; however, teachers eliminated gender stereotypes with their behavior and communication with parents, and teacher candidates believed that they would rise above stereotypes in time. This result supports previous studies. Negative attitudes ranged from surprise to suspicion, including the belief that male teachers must be homosexuals or pedophiles and the fear that they may be dangerous and abusive to children (Williams, 1995). Parents hold stereotypes of male early childhood education teachers and approach them with those stereotypes in place (Temiz & Cin, 2017). A general stereotype surrounds male early childhood teachers in Turkish society (Şahin et al., 2018).

This situation can be explained by the stereotype threat (Sears, Taylor, & Peplau, 2016), which causes people to feel pressure to conform to a stereotype associated with them. Teacher candidates in this study stated their negative expectations for their professional lives but felt no anxiety about their educational lives. They were pleased with their friends, their parents, and instructors. Their parents expressed positive opinions about their job selection primarily because appointments to the position were readily available. Teacher candidates faced no negative attitudes from their instructors. Only one study showing the opposite: Participants stated that their instructors approached them prejudicially; however, no studies have shown the prejudices of instructors toward male teacher candidates (Haskan-Avcı, Karababa, & Zencir, 2019).

Another result of the current study showed that if male teacher candidates cannot do their jobs easily or have trouble, they and their parents view a position as a vice-principal or principal of a school as an alternative. The goal of some teacher candidates was to serve as school principals or to open private schools as a career goal instead of teaching in a classroom (Haskan-Avcı, Zencir, Karababa et al., 2018).

In conclusion, the number of male early childhood teachers has increased, but men still face many prejudices within the profession. Because of the stereotype threat, they feel anxious and sometimes think about giving up their goal of teaching preschool. Gender stereotyping in early childhood teaching must be eliminated. It can cause the number of males in the profession to decline, increasing the perception that teaching preschool is for women only (Murray, 1996; Rolfe, 2006). Even though men play an important role in child development, a limited number of men and most women in early childhood education perpetuate the notion that preschool teaching is a woman's job (Anliak, 2004; Couchenour & Chrisman, 2016). For the development of gender equity reform and the creation of varied models in early childhood education, men must have a place there (MacNaughton & Newman, 2001).

Recommendations

Some recommendations have emerged from this study of the scarcity of male early childhood teachers. First, male in-service and preservice preschool teachers should discuss the pros and cons of entering the profession with one another. Second, new projects that will encourage students to

choose jobs traditionally held by those of a particular gender, such as nursing and early childhood education, can be developed. For example, a project called Honeybees Becoming Architects has been in operation in Turkey for the last few years to encourage girls to pursue studies to prepare them to enter the field of architecture. Third, studies should be conducted to inform families who hold prejudices against men in early childhood education that men are vital in this field. Finally, some educational programs can be organized for male in-service early childhood teachers from different parts of the country or the world in which these teachers can convene, either in person or virtually. To avoid isolation, these men should be encouraged to join professional organizations where they can see other men in the same profession (Chusmir, 1990). In addition, to avoid gender stereotyping of men in early childhood education, the society requires education about the ill effects of negative stereotyping.

Previous studies have been done mostly with mothers, children, and teachers. Future researchers should pursue fathers' perceptions. In addition, most studies like the current one were done to understand the situation or obstacles male teachers faced, but future studies can be done to solve the problem of gender stereotyping through methods like action research. Because Norway had the highest proportion of male preschool teachers, future researchers can examine the policies in Norway that have made this possible.

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