

Men as Early Childhood Educators: Experiences and Perspectives of Two Male Prospective Teachers

Stephen Joseph, Ph.D¹ & Zita Wright, M.Phil¹

Abstract

This study explored the experiences and perspectives of two male prospective teachers pursuing studies in early childhood care and education at the national university of Trinidad and Tobago. A descriptive case study design was employed, utilizing a qualitative semi-structured interviewing technique as a data collection method for this study. Data analysis consisted of examining, categorizing, and tabulating the evidence to address the main research question of the study. Five themes emerged from the study namely, factors influencing choice of career path; fears, challenges, and stereotypes; early childhood care as a low status job; strategies for attracting men into the early childhood profession; and benefits of male involvement in caring for young children. This study attempted to address a specific issue in a given context; therefore its findings cannot be generalized to the larger population. However, the study is important because it serves to introduce the conversation into a Trinidad and Tobago framework where in a population of approximately 1.2 million people, only few men are pursuing tertiary-level studies in a field dominated by women.

Keywords: men, early childhood educators, experiences, perspectives

1. Introduction

Recent studies have pointed to the feminization of the Trinidad and Tobago teaching profession where males make up approximately one quarter of the teaching service (Joseph & Jackman, 2014; Joseph, 2015). The situation is further exacerbated at the early childhood level where the presence of male teachers is almost non-existent. Trinidad and Tobago is not alone in this regard. Statistics from Australia show that only about two percent of males make up the early childhood profession (Demopoulos, 2012). Reports from New Zealand suggest that less than one percent of early childhood educators are men (Williams, 2009). The same pattern exists in the United States and Canada (Martin & Luth, 2000). The primary reason suggested for this female workforce in early childhood care, is that historically, child care has been seen as women's work (Cameron, Moss & Owen, 1999; Cameron, 2001; Goldstein, 1997; Steinberg, 1996). According to Sumsion (2000), this "highly gendered construction can problematize the participation of male teachers in the early childhood years" (p.130).

Widespread public belief that women are more nurturing than men, also serves as a barrier to men contemplating careers in early childhood education (Cunningham & Watson, 2002; King, 1998; Robinson, 1981; Neugebauer, 1994; Sanders, 2002; Cunningham & Dorsey, 2004; Jones, 2003).

Review of the literature revealed that very little research has been done on men as early childhood educators; and those studies that broached the subject focus largely on the negative aspects of this career choice. While Jordan's (2011) study indicated that some men obtained support from teachers, family members and close friends to pursue careers in early childhood care, the majority of other studies reported fears and challenges faced by men in the profession.

¹ Centre for Education Programmes, The University of Trinidad and Tobago.

Despite their motivation to enter the early childhood profession, a major concern for male early childhood providers is the public perception that men are more likely than others to abuse children (Barnard, Hovingh & Nezwik, 2000; Sanders, 2002; McNay, 2001).

Such public suspicion serves as a pull factor away from teaching positions at the early childhood level. Many men who remain in the profession often gravitate to administrative positions as a means of escape from constant public scrutiny (Barnard et al., 2000; Budig, 2002; Jensen, 1996; Sargent, 2001, 2002). Saunders (2002) suggests that very often male early childhood teachers find it necessary to defend their choice of career to not only family members and friends, but also female counterparts with whom they work.

The low status ascribed to early childhood education has been identified as another reason why so few men enter the profession. This is also accompanied by the misconception that early childhood education requires minimal skills and competencies (Barnard et al., 2000). Some agree that the low status of early childhood education may be one reason for the low salaries paid to persons working in the field (Cooney & Bittner, 2001). Cohen (1992) suggests that many male teachers trained in early childhood care move into higher status and higher paying jobs in school administration and higher education.

Notwithstanding societal misconceptions, male early childhood educators want the opportunity to work with young children without being placed under constant scrutiny by administrators, other teachers, and parents for possibly being gay or pedophile (Fagan, 1996; Neugebauer, 1999; Sargent, 2002). These men simply want the opportunity to pursue a career in early childhood care and education if they choose to do so. In support of men as early childhood educators, Carrington and Skelton (2003) suggest that such individuals can make a positive contribution to the ethos of the school through their role as mentors.

Several reports written on the status of early childhood care and education in Latin America and the Caribbean, have generally focused on increasing access to children 3-5 years old, in an effort to achieve the goal of Education for All (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization: World Conference on Early Childhood Care and Education, 2010; Charles & Williams, 2006). Other reports explored the development and socialization of children under 5 years old in Trinidad and Tobago and Dominica (Barrow & Ince, 2008).

In Trinidad and Tobago, attempts have been made to develop standards for regulating early childhood services on the twin-island state. These standards range from registration and licensing of early childhood centres to staffing and health and safety (Ministry of Education, Early Childhood Care and Education Unit, 2005). One such standard relating to staffing is that all persons working in early childhood centres must obtain a police certificate of good character. However, no reference has been made specifically to men as early childhood educators and the need to possibly adopt strategies to attract this minority group into the profession. This study attempts to introduce the conversation to the Trinidad and Tobago context by exploring the experiences and perceptions of men as early childhood educators.

2. Purpose of the study

The purpose of the study is to gain an insight into how two male prospective teachers describe their experiences and perspectives as early childhood educators. Descriptive in nature, this single case study explores a unique situation where in the entire country of Trinidad and Tobago, only a few men, to date, have undertaken tertiary-level studies in early childhood care and education. It is therefore, necessary, to document this phenomenon in an attempt to understand how to address the issue at the level of the university as well as the wider community. The main research question addressed in this study was: How do male prospective teachers describe their experiences and perspectives as early childhood educators?

3. Methodology

3.1 Description of the participants

This case study examined the experiences and perspectives of two male prospective teachers (Reuben and Sarran), who are pursuing studies in early childhood care and education at the national university in Trinidad and Tobago.

Reuben is a 33-year old male student who is pursuing part-time studies leading to a certificate in early childhood care and education. He is employed as an on-the-job trainee attached to a primary school where he serves as a library assistant. In addition to his responsibility as a library assistant, Reuben occasionally assists the infant (early childhood) teacher with classroom teaching. Upon completion of the certificate programme, Reuben plans to read for a bachelor of education degree with specialization in early childhood care and education.

Sarran is a 23-year old full-time male student who is pursuing a B. Ed. degree in early childhood care and education. While he is interested in continuing studies in early childhood education at the master's level, Sarran wants to remain a classroom practitioner at the early child level. He says: *"It is my joy and pride to stay inside the classroom."*

3.2 Design

A descriptive case study design was employed to investigate the experiences and perspectives of men as early childhood educators. According to Merriam (2001), the essential purpose of a case study design is to gain in-depth understanding of the situation and meaning for those involved. In this regard, we attempted to find out how two male prospective teachers describe their experiences as students pursuing studies in a field dominated by women.

3.3 Procedures and Data Analysis

A qualitative semi-structured interviewing technique was used as a data collection method for this study. This form of data collection is particularly useful in facilitating the type of flexibility required for discussing the experiences and perspectives of the participants (Crano & Brewer, 2002; Sarantakos, 2005). A standard protocol was developed for the two interviews which were taped and transcribed verbatim. Each interview lasted for one hour, following which participants were given the opportunity to verify information generated during the interview sessions. Researchers used probing questions to obtain additional information when necessary. Lincoln and Guba (1985) confirm that member checking or respondent validation is a necessary procedure to establish validity for a qualitative study.

When conducting interviews, Yin (2003) suggested that the researchers must possess the ability to ask good questions and interpret the responses. They must also be good listeners, adaptive and flexible, knowledgeable of the issues being studied, and unbiased by preconceived notions. Both researchers of this study have over thirty years' experience at all levels of the education system. One of the researchers has extensive training and experience in early childhood care and education both at the level of the classroom as well as at the administrative level.

Data analysis for this study consisted of examining, categorizing, and tabulating the evidence to address the main research question of the study (Yin, 1994). The following five themes emerged from information collected during interviews conducted with Reuben and Sarran, the two male participants of the study:

- factors influencing choice of career path
- fears, challenges and stereotypes
- early childhood care as a low status job
- strategies for attracting men into the early childhood profession
- benefits of male involvement in caring for young children

This qualitative study attempted to address a specific issue in a given context. As such, its findings cannot be generalized to the larger population.

4. Results

4.1 Factors influencing choice of career path

Reuben's early influence into teaching came from a male primary school teacher with whom he has maintained contact for over twenty years. He considers this teacher as a mentor. Reuben recalls: *"He (the teacher) made everything interesting... you felt that you wanted to come to school..."*

Reuben welcomes the opportunity to participate in what he describes as “building a foundation” for young children by instilling in them moral and ethical values. He says: *“Men should look at this as a challenge not to be left only to women.”* He believes that, like women, men also possess the capacity to nurture. *“The world is changing”* he says, *“and we must keep up with the times.”* While Reuben insists that early childhood care is the path he wants to pursue, he says: *“I would not do it as a very old man.”* He has a vision of one day establishing and managing his own early childhood centre.

Like Reuben, Sarran’s early influence came from a male physical education teacher who encouraged him to push for excellence even while embracing his love for sports during his secondary school years. He explains that two main factors influenced his choice of career in early childhood education. He says: *“Some people claim that men do not really go into this field. I wanted to know why...what the reason is for this...”*

As a man operating in a predominantly female profession, Sarran embraced the opportunity to challenge the status quo; and since early childhood education was a new area for him, Sarran seized the opportunity to *“learn something new.”* Sarran believes that while some men think that physical work is more *“manly”* than teaching young children, he sees a career in early childhood education as *“something new...and many people are often afraid of change.”*

4.2 Fears, challenges and stereotypes

When asked about his greatest fears operating as an early childhood educator, Reuben says: *“For me, it would be the stigma attached to men who teach young children.”* He regards this stigma as *“the number one challenge to overcome in the future.”* He indicated that his experience working in the school system has taught him a valuable lesson: *“People outside there are not very nice trustworthy people ... even people who work in an education environment.”*

Reuben believes that men who teach young children are generally regarded with suspicion. While such views are difficult to escape, he believes that less suspicion is directed towards men who teach at the primary school level. Reuben also believes that if men in early childhood education adopt a professional attitude as well as an effective teaching style, there is likely to be less suspicion from parents, teachers, and the public at large.

Unlike Reuben who identifies his greatest fear as the stigma attached to men who teach young children, Sarran’s fear is somewhat different. He describes his fear as the inability to effectively deliver content to students at the early childhood level. He says: *“I do not have proper language skills... and I want my students to reach their fullest potential...but for them to reach that potential, I must also function at a high level.”* Sarran believes that the labels and stereotypes people impose on men who teach young children come as a result of *“a lack of education.”* He says: *“If men do not know what the early childhood profession entails ... they would not want to go into that profession.”*

4.3 Early childhood care as a low status job

Sarran believes that men generally regard early childhood education as low status because of lack of understanding of what the profession is all about. He puts it this way: *“From my perspective, I believe that men do not know what the profession entails...there is a lack of education...if men are not understanding the profession, I believe that they will not go into that profession.”* Sarran admits, however, that at times he too is sometimes self-conscious about his career choice. He says: *“When my friends and I are having a discussion about job choices, most of them would talk about engineering...and I do not want to say that I want to be an early childhood educator...I want to say something that is in my friend’s category. I believe that is the dilemma... but if we educate men about what the job entails, how males are important in children’s lives, their perception might change entirely.”*

4.4 Strategies for attracting men into the early childhood profession

Notwithstanding the challenges men face in choosing a career in early childhood education, Reuben believes that more men could be attracted to the field if they understand what he considers to be a fundamental principle in early childhood teaching. Reuben explains:

“I think that many men have not learned that children learn through play. As a young man growing up, one of the main attractions for me was play... playing with toys and other things. So I think that if men know that learning through play is one of the most important things in teaching young children that would interest them. I have a lot of ideas I would like to try out.”

Reuben admits, however, that while the idea of teaching children to learn through play is fascinating to him, it might not be enough to convince his male counterparts to join him in the field of early childhood education. Sarran believes that one strategy for attracting men into the profession can be accomplished by organizing career days for secondary school students as well as members of the public.

Through this medium, male students like himself could reach out to other young men, explaining to them the importance of the male influence in the lives of young children. He says:

"We could express ourselves, giving males an insight into what early childhood education is all about. We could show them the importance of the male in early childhood care and education and how men can play a critical role in children's development. I think that if we educate them, they would be inspired."

4.5 Benefits of male involvement in caring for young children

Quite apart from his desire to challenge the status quo, Sarran wanted to obtain the necessary skills and competencies to assist in teaching his younger siblings between the ages 2-5 years. He believes that as an older brother, he can assist his father in caring for his children. He says: *"Looking at the whole family, I wanted my brothers and sisters to be even better than I was."* Sarran recalls times when his father, a maxi-taxi driver, had to struggle to provide for his eight siblings. He continues: *"Not only that, my parents had little knowledge about child development... Taking this degree in early childhood care and education will help me to teach my brothers and sisters the correct way, the proper way based on child development and stuff like that... I can help my family reach a higher standard of living in general."*

5. Discussion

The main research question addressed in this study was: How do male prospective teachers describe their experiences and perspectives as early childhood educators? For Reuben, it was his primary school teacher who provided the initial motivation for him to pursue a career in early childhood education because he (the teacher) made learning fun and interesting. In Sarran's case, his early influence came from his male secondary school teacher who challenged him to push for excellence both in sports as well as academics. These experiences mirror those reported by Jordan (2011) where some of the men in his study were influenced by relatives who were also teachers, family members and close friends at church. It is noteworthy that both Reuben and Sarran identified male teachers as mentors who influenced their decision to enter into the teaching profession. The idea of male teachers acting as role models for young boys has been supported by studies conducted by Davison and Nelson, 2011; Allan, 1994; Priegert Coulter and McNay, 1993; Montecinos and Nielson, 1997; Thornton, 1999. But the notion of just being a role model is not good enough. Cooney and Bittner (2001) cautioned that having a poor role model could do significant damage in the classroom.

The question of fears, challenges and stereotypes emerged as a major theme in this study. These findings support those of previous studies conducted in Europe, North America, and other parts. For example, one of the participants expressed concern about the labels and stereotypes associated with men who teach young children. According to Nelson (as cited in Malaby & Ramsey, 2011), such stereotypes hold that teaching is women's work and men who are willing to engage in women's work must be either gay or sexual predators. As a prospective teacher, Reuben sees this as the number one challenge he has to overcome in the future. Researchers like Barnard, Hovingh and Nezwiek, 2000; Sanders, 2000; and McNay, 2003, have pointed to widespread public suspicion of men who operate in an early childhood environment. And like other men faced with similar challenges, Reuben believes that the primary school system may provide an escape from the constant glare of the public. While Reuben is concerned about the stigma attached to men who teach young children, Sarran's greatest fear is his inability to effectively deliver the curriculum. His concern is centred more on the quality of his teaching rather than public perception of him as an early childhood educator. Reuben, however, believes that men in early childhood care will gain greater respect from the public if they present themselves in a more professional manner, demonstrating competence in their teaching.

The question of low job status was another issue that emerged from discussions with one of the participants of the study. Sarran admitted to feeling a bit self-conscious among friends who aspired to jobs in the engineering field. However, he felt that there was a general lack of understanding among men about early childhood care as a viable job option for consideration. The low status given to early childhood education is identified in the literature as one of the reasons for the low salaries paid to persons working in the field (Cooney & Bittner, 2001). Barnard et al. (2000) suggest that perhaps this is also another reason why so few men enter the profession. Both participants of the study believe that misconceptions associated with the early childhood profession can be corrected by educating men differently. Results of this study suggest the need for careful consideration to be given to developing strategies aimed at attracting men to the early childhood profession. Two significant points were made.

First, public awareness can be obtained through career fairs for school children where they could be introduced to the idea of early childhood education as a viable profession to pursue. Second, male early childhood teachers have a significant role to play in sensitizing students to the range of possibilities offered in the field of early childhood care and education. Given the shortage of men in the early childhood profession, there may be need for additional support from the relevant government authorities if the message of men as early childhood educators is to be effectively communicated to the wider community. The national university also has a role to play in supporting male participation in early childhood education.

6. Conclusion

The literature has identified four major issues associated with the idea of men as early childhood educators. These issues include the notion that women are more nurturing than men and the corresponding view that childcare is women's work; concern about low salary; low status ascribed to the profession; and public suspicion of men who care for young children. Notwithstanding negative public perception about men in early childhood education, the Trinidad and Tobago society stands to benefit from greater male participation in the education of young children. Carrington and Skelton (2003) remind us that such individuals can make a positive contribution to the ethos of the school through their role as mentors. Findings of the study also suggest that fathers and other male caregivers should find information on early childhood care useful to their own practice as parents and guardians.

7. Recommendations

- There is need for relevant government ministries to take a leading role in addressing the issue of the scarcity of men in early childhood classrooms.
- The national university should play a more active role in boosting enrollment and male participation in early childhood programmes, while addressing the issues that confront men willing to pursue careers in early childhood care and education.
- There is need also for further research to obtain the views of both fathers and mothers, teachers and the wider Trinidad and Tobago public on the issue of men as early childhood educators.

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