The Lived Experience Of Male Early Childhood Teachers

Noremay B. Perez

Cebu Normal University, College of Teacher Education, Cebu City, Philippines
perezn@cnu.edu.ph

Abstract: Researches indicate that the involvement of male teachers in Early Childhood Education is beneficial, yet they covered a little percentage of the total population of teachers. Relatively, minimal research has been conducted on the perception of male teachers on their teaching experience in early childhood Education. The purpose of this descriptive phenomenological study was to describe the lived experience of male working as Early Childhood teachers. Using purposive sampling, five (5) male ECE teachers participated in the study who met the criteria of having at least three-year teaching experience in Early Childhood Education and able to describe and narrate their experience as ECE teachers. All data were collected through in-depth interviews. Data analysis suggested five (5) main themes including the burning passion, the exhausting beginning, a challenging profession, a fulfilling profession, and the questioning society. This study revealed that participants viewed their experience as both challenging and fulfilling, questioned by society but fueled by the passion to teach children.

Keywords: male teachers, Early Childhood Education, lived experience

1. Introduction

Several studies have pointed to the feminization of the teaching profession where male teachers covered a little percentage of the total population of teachers [10], [2], [11]. This condition is further intensified at the early childhood level where the presence of male teachers is almost nonexistent [4]. This gender imbalance in the early childhood education workforce is a global phenomenon. Available research shows that the percentage of male early childhood educators hovered around 1–3% in most western countries [7]. The lack of men in ECE is also evident in non-Western countries such as China, where men comprise only 2% of ECE teachers [11]. The same situation is experienced in the Philippines where men are outnumbered by women ECE teachers. The primary reason for female workforce in early childhood education is that historically, child care has been seen as a woman’s work. The society’s belief that women are more nurturing has become a barrier of men’s participation in early childhood teaching profession [4]. Moreover, men who care for children are often looked at with suspicion as to their motives [8]. On the other hand, Zhang [12] points out that male presence in ECE benefits the children with a male role model offer another perspective of the world especially for children who have a single-parent family or long-hour working parents. Most of the male teachers agree that they feel as an influential role model to their students [1]. Moreover, it helps children to learn that males are not only brave and strong, but also have a side that is gentle and caring, which helps to break the arbitrary gender role of traditional culture. The experiences of women who venture into traditionally male professions have been well documented. However, there is scant documentation on the experiences of men moving into traditionally female occupations. In particular, little attention has been paid to the men who chose to become educators of young learners [10]. And while there are few studies on the contributions of male teachers in early childhood education, there is no recent research in the Philippines that focused on the perception of the male teachers on their teaching experience in early childhood education. Thus, this study aims to describe their lived experience including the challenges and successes they encountered.

2. Methodology

A qualitative Husserlian descriptive phenomenological approach and colalizzi’s seven steps of data analysis are utilized in this study to describe the experiences of the male early childhood teachers. It focused on the participants’ given descriptions to generate an essence of their lived experiences. Purposive sampling was used to identify male teachers who are teaching in early childhood education. This method of sampling helped to create a homogenous sample of participants that have all experienced the phenomenon. Teachers were selected from the schools in Cebu, both public and private schools. Moreover, they were selected from nursery 1 to Kindergarten levels to focus the experience within the boundaries of young students. Finally, they were required to have at least three (3) years of experience in teaching early childhood learners. The researcher explained the study, its merits and the expected form of participation to the prospective participants. The participants were given a consent form before the interviews started. The informed consent form in detail included the purpose of the study and how it will be conducted; the benefits for the participants; how the privacy, anonymity and confidentiality of the participants will be ensured, among others. The nature of data gathering in this phenomenological study was through one-on-one interview. Interviews were unstructured to have a smooth flow and flexible conversation between the researcher and the participants. The average duration of the interview was twenty (20) minutes. Interviews were recorded and transcribed. Transcripts were read and re-read to obtain the general sense about the whole content. Significant statements that pertain to the phenomenon under study were extracted. Meanings were formulated from the significant statements. The findings were presented in themes to discuss the meaning of the lived experiences of the participants. Finally, validation of the findings was sought from the research participants to compare the researcher’s descriptive results with their experiences.
3. Results and Discussion
The themes of meaning that emerged were as follows:

Theme No. 1: The Burning Passion
The participants expressed that their passion to teach children has been their reason of choosing and staying as early childhood teachers. Two subthemes emerged out of this theme.

a. Acquired Passion
Two of the five participants shared that they have chosen the profession because of job opportunities. However, as they spend time teaching children, they come to enjoy what they are doing. They acquire the passion to teach young learners.

Participant 1 shared, “I have chosen to be an Early Childhood teacher for practical reason. The year when I enrolled in college was also the time when K to 12 was introduced; hence, more job opportunities for ECE teachers. But along the way, my reason of teaching has changed. It becomes a dedication to teach kids.”

Participant 2 expressed, “I applied as a volunteer teacher in Kindergarten just to gain a teaching experience. It was the time of the implementation of the K to 12. Looking back, I didn’t plan to stay in this job for a long time. However, as time passed by I come to enjoy being with children.” The experiences of the two participants showed that job opportunity is a factor of choosing a career path. Furthermore, the implementation of the K to 12 program in the Philippines creates more opportunities for employment in the Early Childhood Education; thus attracting more early childhood teachers. Two subthemes emerged out of this theme.

b. Innate Passion
Of the five participants, three expressed that they have chosen the profession because of their personal interest and passion to help children learn. They claimed that they enjoyed being with children even when they were not yet teachers.

Participant 2 stated, “I grew up with kids and I have been exposed to teaching kids during my teenage days. Those prior experiences deepen my interest to teach young learners.”

Participant 4 said: “Since young, I enjoy being with children. The time I had to choose what career to pursue, it was easy for me to decide. Without hesitation I chose to become an early childhood teacher.” The decision of becoming a teacher can be an innate calling at a young age and a profound personal experience. This suggests that male teachers valued the emotional significance of their job and that the other factors of choosing the profession, such as job opportunity and salary, are just secondary. Additionally, Participant 5 expressed that even his gender didn’t hinder him to become an early childhood teacher, “…it is not the gender that makes a teacher effective but the drive and passion for teaching.” These reflections support the finding in the study of Xu & Waniyanayake [11] which states that male teachers’ love of children is the greatest reason of choosing to be an early childhood teacher. Prioritizing their love of children is a key motivator in seeking employment in the Early Childhood Education sector.

Theme No. 2: The Exhausting Beginning
The participant described their first year of teaching as a difficult challenge. As new teachers, they struggled to keep their heads above the water. Despite their college trainings, they seemed to be unprepared of the realities of teaching young learners. They encountered situations and problems they had not anticipated.

Participant 4 declared, “The most challenging stage of my career was my first year of teaching. The students were hesitant to get inside the classroom when they saw that they have a male teacher. Back then, I didn’t know what to do and how to make them feel comfortable. I find it quite awkward to act like one of them just for them to get closer to me.” Children being afraid of their teacher and hesitant to get inside the classroom are common occurrences at the beginning of the school year. They may be scared of male teachers because of their physical shape or looks (Xu & Waniyanayake [11]). These scenarios can be very challenging for a teacher who has experienced it for the first time.

Participant 3 also shared, “During my first year of teaching, I struggled on how to handle the learners especially when they wanted to urinate or defecate. At that time, I wasn’t so equipped with the strategies on dealing with children.” Taking care of children’s physical needs can be a tormenting experience for a first time teacher. It can be hard and can drain a lot of the teacher’s energy. The challenges can range from dealing with difficult behaviors to attending to children’s personal necessities [6]. Even though these male teachers were not certain on how to deal with young learners, they still took charge with the responsibility for children’s learning. So, they were teaching and learning how to teach at the same time. They struggled to be equipped with different strategies to keep the classroom functioning smoothly. However, it was noted that as teachers gained more classroom experiences, they became more comfortable about how to interact with children [12].

Theme No. 3: A Challenging Profession
The participants expressed that being a male early childhood teacher is a challenging profession. They specify that both learners and parents have made their job tough.

Participant 1 has difficulty communicating with the young learners. He narrated, “I find it hard to communicate with children. I need to filter words that are appropriate for these learners in a language that they understand. I also need to ease the tone of my voice so that they won’t be scared of me, unlike the females who have naturally sweet voice.” The teacher’s right choice of words is a powerful tool in getting the attention and trust of the learners. However effective communication with them is not just about choosing the right words, but also using the pleasant tone of voice. Since most men teachers have low and loud voice, they find it
challenging to communicate with children. Moreover, they were perceived to have an ineffective communication especially with girls because male teachers are unlike women who have naturally warm and affectionate tone of voice [3].

Participant 4 has become challenged with having more patience and being more creative. He shared, “Being an early childhood teacher is challenging. I need to have more patience in dealing with the young learners. I also need to provide more interactive and interesting activities for the children. In ECE, I don’t just focus in the academic, but most importantly in integrating play to our lessons. I need to be creative.” The same was experienced by a male teacher in the study of Joseph & Wright [4] who said that his greatest challenge was to effectively deliver the curriculum because of his reactions to learners’ behavior. Xu & Waniganayake [11], revealed that many considered men teachers as not so patient with young children. On the other hand, Participant 5 expressed that the parents’ prejudices have made his job difficult. He said, “It was a challenge for me to deal with parents’ prejudices. They viewed a male teacher as strict; hence, making their children afraid of going to school. It’s also hard to get their trust because they associate male teachers with child abuse.” This experience mirrors the report of Lam [2], stating that some parents of young learners were against the hiring of male teachers. They expressed concern on male teachers taking physical care of their children. Specifically, they are not comfortable about a male teacher who takes charge of their children when going to the toilet. Xu & Waniganayake [11] agreed that parents have concerns about their children’s care in early childhood when taught by male teachers. They are influenced by the traditional views that men are not skillful in caring. To sum up, parents’ apprehensions about male early childhood teachers include child abuse and male teachers’ inability to handle children’s self-care [3].

Theme No. 4: A Fulfilling Profession
Male Early Childhood teachers’ experiences are not just about stories of struggles but also stories of successes. The participants described their experience as fulfilling.

Participant 3 expressed, “It feels rewarding when you teach young learners and you see how they improved, how they learn to read and write. I feel happy about it and would tell myself I’ll stay in this profession.” Participant 4 shares the same sentiment and he said, “Teaching young learners is a very fulfilling job. You get to see the improvements of your learners. For instance, I get to observe how my students learn to write their names. I feel happy when they proudly show to me their work.” Participant 5 added, “It is rewarding seeing these learners learn and mature under my guidance.”

According to Mashiya [5], the presence of the male teachers in the classrooms had helped learners academically. Significant improvements of young learners are very observable, such as learning to read and write. This makes the teachers feel a sense of achievement and worth. Male teachers also take pride in maintaining classroom discipline. Participant 1 shared, “I am proud that my students are more disciplined compared to the other students under a female teachers. Other teachers would even observe my class to learn some classroom management techniques.” Male teachers declared that they have more control on children making them follow the rules in the classroom [3].

also found that even the female teachers think that male teachers are better disciplinarians [5]. With this characteristic, the male teachers are able to manage the class well and they serve as examples to their colleagues. The participants also view their experience as fulfilling because they get to enjoy while working. This perspective was mirrored by Participant 3 declaring. I view my job as a positive experience because I get to enjoy and have fun while teaching. I also get the opportunities to play with children. Male teachers are themselves boys who would love to play more with children. In a comparable study, male teachers shared that their most important contribution was giving children the opportunity to play while still enforcing learning [10]. In return, they too get to opportunity to play and enjoy. When the participants talked about making a difference in the lives of children, they considered all their efforts meaningful.

Theme No. 5: The Questioning Society
The society which includes the participants’ family, friends, colleagues, and the public, has questioned their choice of profession.

Participant 1 shared, “The people around me have many questions about my choice of profession.” Participant 2 also remarked, “It’s perennial that other people ask why I’ve chosen to be a male ECE teacher. They said I have a brighter future ahead of me.” The same thing was experienced by Participant 3 and he narrated, “Some people around me would question my choice of profession and would ask how I cope with the demand of my job. They want me to be in the higher level because they see that the lower level (early childhood education) is for female teachers. Sumsion [10] suggests that frequently male early childhood teachers have to defend their choice of career to their family members, friends, and colleagues. This is due to Society’s perception that Early Childhood Education is mainly about child care, and is thus considered as women’s work. Xu and Waniganayake [11] revealed that people nowadays are influenced by the traditional view that ECE teachers are aunts who care for children and even those who don’t have a college degree are competent. Moreover, male early childhood teachers are commonly described as unambitious and unpromising. The low status attributed to early childhood education has been identified as a reason there is only few men who join the profession [4].

4. Conclusion
The lived experience of the male early childhood teachers is a combination of struggles and fulfillments. Communicating with children and dealing with their behavior are the aspects that made their job challenging. Additionally, parents’ prejudices about them, such as their inability to handle children’s self-care and being associated to child abuse have made their job even more difficult. They felt that their first year of teaching was the most challenging stage of their career. However, despite the trials that they have encountered, they considered their job as very rewarding. Seeing their students improved academically and behaviorally has made them feel fulfilled. And though the society questions their choice of profession, they are certain that they will remain as Early Childhood teachers because of their passion to teach children.
References


Author Profile

Ms. Noremay B. Perez is a graduate of Bachelor of Elementary Education in Cebu Normal University. She has topped the Licensure Examination for Teachers in 2011. In the same university, she has obtained her Master’s Degree in English Language Teaching and has completed the academic requirements for Master of Arts in Education major in Early Childhood Education. Currently, she is pursuing her Doctorate Degree in Early Childhood Education in Cebu Technological University.

Ms. Perez is a student teaching mentor in the Integrated Laboratory School of Cebu Normal University handling graduating students of Bachelor in Elementary Education major in Early Childhood Education.