Research Paper

The Lived Experiences of Male Early Childhood Educators: Insights from Qualitative Interviews

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Abstract

Male educators in early childhood education represent a small but vital demographic. However, their experiences and challenges have mainly been underexplored due to persistent gender stereotypes and the historically female-dominated nature of the field. This study aimed to address this gap by exploring the lived experiences of male early childhood educators, shedding light on their professional challenges, contributions, and perspectives. Employing a phenomenological research design, the study utilized Colaizzi's method to analyze data from in-depth semi-structured interviews with ten (10) purposefully selected male educators, each with a minimum of two years of teaching experience. The findings revealed three primary themes. First, male educators demonstrated their resilience and adaptability by using a variety of coping mechanisms to navigate professional and societal challenges, including gender biases and parental skepticism. Second, despite these challenges, they conveyed a deep sense of professional fulfillment from their work, emphasizing their passion for fostering young children's holistic development and their commitment to reshaping perceptions of male educators in early childhood settings. Lastly, the results highlighted the increasing interest in male educators as essential father-like figures and positive male role models, reinforcing the need for greater gender inclusivity in early childhood education. The results showed that male educators are as capable of providing excellent learning opportunities and experiences as their female counterparts. Their distinct viewpoints and methods helped create a more varied and stimulating learning environment. This study challenges traditional gender norms and advocates for a more inclusive and equitable early childhood education workforce.
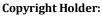
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INTRODUCTION

Few male educators enter the early childhood education field, which remains largely dominated by female educators in the workforce. This gender imbalance reflects deeply ingrained cultural and societal norms, as explained by Social Role Theory (Eagly & Woods, 2016), which posits that gender roles are shaped by social expectations and cultural norms that reinforce the association between nurturing and caregiving roles primarily with women, particularly in contexts where early childhood education is perceived as an extension of maternal care. They are expected to provide a motherly-like presence during the child's foundational years. In the Philippines, the absence of substantial data on male representation in early childhood education suggests a persistent oversight in research and policy, further marginalizing the experiences of male educators in the field. Without clear documentation, their challenges, contributions, and professional trajectories remain largely invisible, making it difficult to design policies that support gender inclusivity in early childhood education.

Globally, male educators remain significantly underrepresented in early childhood education, with the percentage varying across different countries. In many European Union nations, male educators make up less than 5% of the ECE workforce, reflecting a persistent gender imbalance in the field (Bhana et al., 2022). In Australia, male educators make up approximately 3%

of early childhood education roles (Henebery, 2024). Similarly, in Southeast Asia, particularly in Singapore and Malaysia, an even smaller proportion, with just 1% of the sector, is occupied by men (Keating & Baker, 2023). While official statistics on male early childhood educators in the Philippines remain scarce, anecdotal evidence suggests an even smaller proportion, mirroring the trends observed in neighboring countries. This low representation is rooted in cultural norms and perceptions that frame caregiving and teaching young children as female-dominated roles.

Notably, given the strikingly low representation of male educators, they often face a range of complex challenges influenced by societal biases and professional stereotypes, drawing on Hegemonic Masculinity Theory (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). These challenges emerge because male educators are positioned outside the dominant norms of masculinity, emphasizing authority, assertiveness, and detachment from caregiving roles. As a result, male early childhood educators face skepticism from parents and colleagues, who question their suitability for working with young children (Brody, 2014). These hurdles may cause them to feel like they are constantly dancing on a tightrope, necessitating the constant demonstration of their professionalism and objectives. Despite the significant weight of these obstacles, many male educators find deep meaning in their roles, viewing their participation as an opportunity to positively influence children's development. By accepting this role, they aim not just to nurture and guide young learners but also to promote gender equality and encourage a more inclusive learning environment. As Reich-Shapiro et al. (2020) suggest, male educators view their engagement in early childhood education as a valuable chance to bolster children's social and emotional development, while simultaneously challenging traditional gender norms and promoting a more inclusive educational environment.

Effective male educators can have a significant impact on both boys and girls by acting as strong role models. According to Ottaviano and Persico (2019), their presence can improve boys' general academic situation and behavioral expectations, but it also benefits girls in comparable ways. While these benefits are widely recognized, further research is needed to explore how male educators themselves perceive their roles and navigate the complexities of working in a predominantly female field.

Following these considerations, this study aimed to investigate the lived experiences of male early childhood educators through qualitative interviews, with an emphasis on their motivations, challenges, and contributions to the field. By documenting their narratives, the research seeks to offer insights into the factors that shape their professional experiences and provide recommendations for fostering greater gender inclusivity in early childhood education. Specifically, the study sought to answer the following questions: (1) What experiences do you have as a male early childhood educator? (2) How have these experiences impacted you?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Male educators comprise a small but significant portion of the early childhood education workforce, which remains predominantly female. The lived experiences of male early childhood educators provide valuable insights into gendered expectations, professional dynamics, and social norms that shape their career pathways. This literature review examines these experiences through the lens of established gender theories, highlights existing policy efforts aimed at improving gender diversity in early childhood settings, and underscores the study's contribution to addressing research gaps.

On Social Role and Hegemonic Masculinity Theories

Early childhood education is crucial for the development of young children's gender identity. Children need to be exposed early on to recognize gender neutrality and diversity. When these

young children have been exposed to and have strong relationships with male educators and caregivers, traditional gender stereotypes are reinforced, particularly in relation to understanding who is responsible for their growth and learning (Brownhill & Oates, 2016). Children experience a range of models of femininity and womanhood through their exposure to varied female educators and caregivers. When young children do not experience a comparable range of models of masculinity, their view of what it means to be a boy or a man may be monolithic (Solomon, 2016). As they grow, children need to see and be part of relationships in which male children and adults are free to be emotionally expressive and deeply connected; this is especially true for children who identify as male, since our culture often discourages them from such expression.

Gender theories offer essential insights into the challenges and experiences faced by male educators in early childhood education. Social Role and Hegemonic Masculinity Theories provide essential frameworks. Social Role Theory by Eagly and Woods (2016) emphasizes that gender roles are shaped by cultural expectations, which in turn dictate behaviors associated with masculinity and femininity. Within this framework, caregiving roles are traditionally assigned to women, reinforcing the perception that early childhood education is inherently feminine.

Moreover, Social Role Theory underscores the influence of social institutions such as families, schools, and media in reinforcing these traditional roles. Male educators are often met with suspicion or concerns about their intentions, which requires them to manage their professional image actively (Sumsion, 2005). This theory explains why male educators are frequently assigned to non-caregiving tasks, such as classroom discipline or leadership roles, reinforcing traditional masculine norms and limiting their opportunities to engage in nurturing interactions with children.

Complementing this, the Hegemonic Masculinity Theory (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005) provides another lens for understanding male educators' experiences. Hegemonic masculinity refers to the dominant form of masculinity that emphasizes traits such as dominance, control, and independence. Within this framework, men who pursue careers in early childhood education may experience tension between societal expectations of masculinity and the nurturing qualities demanded by their profession. This tension often leads male educators to overcompensate by emphasizing protective or leadership roles to assert masculinity (Burke et al., 2023).

Research has demonstrated that male educators must continuously negotiate these conflicting roles. On one hand, they strive to provide emotional support and care to children; on the other, they feel pressured to adopt authoritative or assertive roles to align with traditional masculine ideals. This internal conflict can undermine their ability to fully engage in nurturing roles, limiting their professional growth and effectiveness (Brody, 2014).

By integrating Social Role Theory and Hegemonic Masculinity Theory, this study frames the complex interplay of societal expectations, professional identities, and role negotiation faced by male educators. These frameworks offer a robust foundation for analyzing the lived experiences of male early childhood educators, highlighting the pressures they endure while recognizing their contributions to fostering gender-inclusive learning environments.

On Societal Expectations and Gender Biases on Male Educators

In recent years, male early childhood educators have drawn more attention and societal biases because of their perceived importance in questioning gender stereotypes and broadening the teaching profession. Research highlights that men in this field may face skepticism from parents, colleagues, and administrators whose questions may focus on the male educators' motives for working with young children (Brody, 2014). As a result, male educators are often expected to demonstrate professionalism consistently to dispel unfounded concerns (Cameron, 2006). Additionally, cultural expectations that reinforce masculinity as incompatible with nurturing roles can create tension for male educators who must carefully navigate these stereotypes (Xu, 2019).

On the contrary, male educators are recognized for their ability to expand children's understanding of gender roles. By modeling emotional expressiveness and supportive behaviors, male educators can offer children a broader view of masculinity and femininity, challenging rigid gender norms (Sullivan et al. 2020). Research also suggests that male educators can provide distinct social and emotional interactions that contribute positively to children's development (McKeen, 2021). This study contributes to the conversation about how male educators deal with these obstacles while working to reshape social norms. It emphasizes their efforts to provide children with well-rounded views on gender, dispel stereotypes, and deliver loving, efficient care.

On Policy Efforts to Increase Male Participation in Early Childhood Education

To address the underrepresentation of male educators in early childhood education, several countries have introduced targeted policy measures. For instance, in Norway and Denmark, recruitment campaigns have actively encouraged men to join the early childhood education workforce by emphasizing the importance of male role models in child development (Warin, 2018). Similarly, in Australia, initiatives such as the "Men in Early Childhood Education" program aim to break down stereotypes and promote gender diversity by offering mentorship, financial incentives, and professional development support (Henebery, 2024). These efforts recognize that improving male participation in early childhood education requires systemic changes that address social perceptions and workplace support structures.

In some Asian contexts, policy approaches are emerging to address this gender imbalance. In Japan, strategic efforts have included funding for gender-inclusive ECE teacher training programs to reduce stigma and promote male engagement in nurturing roles (de Moll & Inaba, 2023). While the Philippines has yet to implement similar large-scale initiatives, the growing awareness of the value of gender diversity in education presents an opportunity for policy reform. Such measures could help dismantle stereotypes, improve male representation, and create a more inclusive educational workforce.

Despite increased recognition of the value of male educators in early childhood education, research exploring their lived experiences remains limited, particularly in Southeast Asia and the Philippines. Existing literature has predominantly focused on Western contexts, overlooking the cultural and social dynamics that shape the experiences of male educators in the Philippine early childhood education sector.

RESEARCH METHOD
Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design. Hermeneutic phenomenology was used to investigate and describe the lived experiences of male early childhood educators. This approach was selected due to its capacity to explore both explicit experiences and the deeper meanings individuals attribute to those experiences. Hermeneutic phenomenology emphasizes interpretation, allowing the researcher to analyze how participants construct meaning within broader social, cultural, and professional contexts. This interpretive nature was particularly vital in this study, given that male early childhood educators often navigate complex emotional, social, and professional dynamics in a predominantly female-dominated profession.

Furthermore, Creswell and Creswell (2017) emphasize how a thorough analysis of how lived experiences inform and influence meaning-making processes is made easier by hermeneutic phenomenology. By using this approach, the study hopes to uncover not only the overt experiences of early childhood educators but also the often-hidden psychological and social factors that influence their development both personally and professionally in their workplace. Through hermeneutic phenomenology, this study presents an authentic and richly textured account of the

lived experiences of male early childhood educators, offering insights that may inform policy, practice, and initiatives promoting gender diversity in early.

Informants of The Study

To select participants, the study employed purposive criterion sampling, a technique suitable for phenomenological research, as it focuses on identifying information-rich cases that can provide deep, nuanced insights into the phenomenon being studied (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The participants were intentionally chosen based on specific inclusion criteria: they were male early childhood educators with at least two years of teaching experience, held relevant teaching qualifications, and were actively working in early childhood education settings at the time of the study. Criterion sampling ensured that all participants had substantial, firsthand experience with the phenomenon under investigation and could provide meaningful reflections on both the explicit aspects of their work and the underlying psychological, social, and cultural dynamics shaping their experiences.

The sample size consisted of ten (10) male educators from selected public and private institutions offering early childhood education programs in the province of Iloilo, Philippines. It was determined following recommendations for phenomenological research, where 5 – 12 participants are generally sufficient to achieve data saturation — the point at which no new themes or insights emerge from the data (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). The selected sample size ensured a balance between obtaining rich, in-depth narratives while maintaining manageability for comprehensive analysis.

Data Collection Procedure/Method

This qualitative research employed a semi-structured one-on-one interview method for data collection due to its flexibility and reliability (Nassaji, 2020). It enabled the researcher to gain a deeper insight into the experiences of male educators. The researcher's task was to maintain ethical considerations at every step of the research process (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). All the private data gathered remained confidential. No identifying names or school details were found. The informants identified for this study agreed to a consent form outlining the study's purpose, procedures, confidentiality, withdrawal options, and contact details. All participants agreed to have the interview recorded.

The interviews were conducted in a language or dialect most comfortable to each informant to ensure an authentic expression of their experiences. The translation and transcription were carefully applied to manage language barriers. The researcher translated the transcription into English, ensuring that cultural nuances and contextual meanings were preserved. The language expert, familiar with the local dialect and educational context reviewed the translated transcripts to enhance accuracy. To confirm that participants' experiences were accurately conveyed, member-checking was also conducted by sharing translated transcripts. The data collection took place over one month during the academic year 2023 – 2024, lasting approximately 45 to 60 minutes per session in various early childhood education settings, including public and private schools offering kindergarten. These settings were deliberately chosen to reflect the diverse institutional contexts in which male early childhood educators work, thereby capturing variations in organizational culture, resource availability, and community expectations. The triangulation process was applied to ensure the robustness and credibility of data interpretation. This involved comparing interview data with field notes, participant observations, and relevant documents to ensure accuracy. Field notes were systematically taken during and immediately after interviews and observation sessions to capture rich contextual details, non-verbal cues, and the researcher's reflective insights. Observations were conducted primarily through classroom visits, where teaching practices,

instructional strategies, and educator–child interactions were closely documented. Attention was given to environmental factors—such as class size, availability and quality of teaching materials, administrative support, and the overall physical learning environment—as these elements were recognized as potential influences on both the educators' professional experiences and the data gathered.

The document review component included classroom observation rating forms and supervisory evaluation reports, which offered formal, institutional perspectives on the educators' performance and professional competencies. These records complemented the qualitative data by providing structured, standardized indicators of teaching quality and professional engagement, thereby enriching the triangulation process and contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of the participants' lived experiences. The interview guide consisted of open-ended questions, such as:

1. Can you describe your journey to becoming an early childhood educator?
2. What challenges have you faced in this profession, and how have you addressed them?
3. How do you perceive the role of male educators in early childhood settings?
4. Can you share a significant experience that shaped your professional perspective?
5. What support mechanisms are necessary for male educators in this field?

The interview result were tape-recorded, transcribed, and interpreted. Brief notes of key phrases were also taken during the interview as insurance against tape failure. The researcher immediately encoded the interview with the assistance of a friend while the memory was fresh, and the interview notes provided invaluable mental triggers. Once each interview was transcribed, a copy was electronically sent to each participant for review to assess plausibility and validity through a qualitative process known as member checks. Member checking is a process that requires the researcher to ask one or more participants to review the data for accuracy or plausibility (Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

Data Analysis

The data gathered from the interview was examined using Colaizzi's data analysis method to gain a better understanding of male early childhood educators lived experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). As outlined by Smith et al. (2009), the importance of creating precise transcripts is emphasized, which are repeatedly revisited to analyze data from multiple perspectives and contexts, ensuring no significant insights are overlooked. The coding and thematic analysis were conducted manually by the researcher, which is consistent with hermeneutic phenomenological research traditions that emphasize the researcher's deep, reflective engagement with the data (van Manen, 2016). Manual analysis allowed the researcher to remain closely connected to the participants' narratives, engaging in repeated, interpretive cycles of reading and reflection that might have been diluted by over-reliance on automated coding functions. The analysis began with familiarization, where the researcher thoroughly read and re-read each transcript to immerse herself in the data and identify initial points of significance.

The initial codes emerged as the interviews and accompanying written notes were analyzed, representing key ideas and patterns within the data. These emerging meanings were then grouped into clusters, where related concepts were organized under broader thematic categories that aligned with the study's objectives. The researcher meticulously reviewed the interview transcripts and field notes to ensure they were detailed and comprehensive, paying particular attention to the distinct perspectives and experiences shared by the participants. This process culminated in the identification of a fundamental structure, where the core themes and patterns captured the essence of the participants' lived experiences. This iterative process facilitated an in-depth and nuanced

exploration of the participants' lived experiences, enabling the identification and refinement of themes that authentically represented their narratives. These themes not only captured the complexity and individuality of each participant's story but also illuminated broader patterns and insights, offering a meaningful and accurate response to the research questions.

Ethical Consideration

To ensure the study adhered to rigorous ethical standards, the following measures were implemented:

1. Informed Consent

    A consent form was provided to all informants, clearly stating that their participation was entirely voluntary. The form outlined their right to withdraw from the study at any stage if they felt uncomfortable during the interview. Informants were given sufficient time to review the consent form and ask questions before agreeing to participate.

2. Confidentiality and Anonymity

    To protect participants' identities, their names and identifying details were kept confidential. Informants were assured that no information revealing their identities would be released or published without their explicit consent. Only when necessary and with participant approval would any identifying information be disclosed, following the guidelines set by the Data Privacy Act. To further ensure anonymity, participants were assigned unique codes in place of their real names throughout the data collection and reporting process.

3. Data Protection and Security

    The researcher safeguarded all collected data by securely storing interview recordings, transcripts, and field notes. Raw data were kept strictly confidential and were deleted after data processing was completed within the designated retention period to prevent unauthorized access.

4. Intellectual Property and Acknowledgments

    All ideas, concepts, and references taken from external sources were appropriately cited following the APA Citation format. This ensured proper acknowledgment of the contributions of other scholars and upheld the principles of academic integrity.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

To gain a deeper understanding of the narratives surrounding the experiences of male educators in early childhood education, this investigation was guided by research questions supported by themes derived through a rigorous and systematic process of data analysis. A series of systematic coding procedures was undertaken to discern significant statements emerging from the participants' experiences. Each statement was assigned an initial code that captured its core meaning. These codes were refined and grouped based on recurring ideas and patterns across participants' narratives. Through this iterative process, broader themes were developed by clustering related codes that reflected shared experiences and insights. The identified themes — coping mechanisms, fulfillment in the profession, and making a positive difference — emerged from recurring patterns in the data, ensuring that they accurately represented the participants' lived experiences. The succeeding statements present a comprehensive visual representation of these key themes, offering further insights into the lived experiences and perspectives shared by the participants of this study.

Table 1. Distribution of Respondents According to Categories

Category	Frequency	Percentage
Entire group	10	100%
Length of Service		
2 years	4	40%
3 – 5 years	6	60%
Educational Attainment		
Master's degree in ECE	1	10%
Education degree in ECE	9	90%
Type of School		
Public School	5	50%
Private School	5	50%

The following common themes for the lived experiences of male early childhood educators surfaced. Theme 1: Coping Mechanisms to Various Challenges; Theme 2: Profound fulfillment in their chosen profession, and Theme 3: Making a positive difference in the lives of young children.

Table 2. Analysis Result of the Qualitative Interview

Themes	Code	Description	Sample Data	Frequency
Theme 1: Coping Mechanisms to Various Challenges				
	Building trust with parents	Strategies used to overcome parental skepticism and establish professional credibility.	"I always introduce myself to parents personally so they know I'm here for their child's well-being."	8
	Professionalism in Conduct	Maintaining appropriate boundaries and demonstrating competence to address societal biases.	"I make sure to follow protocols when interacting with children to avoid misunderstandings."	7
	Peer Support and Collaboration	Seeking guidance, mentorship, and sharing experiences with colleagues for professional growth.	"I rely on my female colleagues for insights on managing the classroom better."	5
Theme 2: Profound Fulfillment in the Profession				
	Emotional Reward	Feelings of pride, joy, and satisfaction derived from nurturing young learners.	"It's a nice feeling when a learner would approach you early in the morning, greet you with big smiles on their face and hug you before they leave your classroom."	8

Themes	Code	Description	Sample Data	Frequency
	Connection with Children	Building meaningful relationships with children that enhance job fulfillment.	"I found it to be inspiring and enjoyable. I love being able to teach, share knowledge and work with young children."	7
	Sense of Purpose	Viewing the profession as a means to make a positive societal impact.	"I know I'm changing lives, one child at a time."	8
Theme 3: Making a Positive Difference in the Lives of Young Children				
	Role Modeling	Providing children with positive male role models to challenge traditional gender norms.	"I want boys and girls to see that men can be caring and nurturing too.""The happiest moment I ever had was when I was helped by some learners in preparing the materials that I'll use for the class."	7 / 5*
	Promoting Inclusivity	Encouraging diverse perspectives to foster a more balanced learning environment.	"I create activities where boys and girls participate equally to break stereotypes."	5
	Instilling Values and Life Skills	Guiding children to develop respect, empathy, and responsibility.	"I teach children that kindness and respect are for everyone, no matter their gender."	6

Theme 1: Coping Mechanisms to Various Challenges

The findings revealed that male early childhood educators employed various coping mechanisms to navigate the unique challenges they encountered in a predominantly female profession. Both internal and external pressures, including societal expectations, professional stereotypes, and emotional strain, shaped these coping strategies. The mechanisms identified can be categorized into three key approaches: building trust with parents, professionalism in conduct, and peer support and collaboration.

Every male educator shared personal stories of times when they faced challenges and felt unable to reach their full potential, especially since they were considered novices in the field. Many described how they were often treated differently by parents and guardians simply because they were male educators. Despite being judged by their choices and perceived differently, they remained firm in their roles as educators in the field. Many participants described intentional efforts to build trust with parents, recognizing that parental concerns about male educators often stem from unfamiliarity or social bias. Strategies included maintaining consistent communication with families, actively participating in parent-teacher conferences, and openly discussing their teaching philosophies. Most participants shared, "I always introduce myself to parents personally,

so they know I am here for their child's well-being." By fostering positive relationships with parents, male educators effectively addressed concerns and built stronger partnerships with families.

Establishing professional boundaries and demonstrating high standards of conduct were key strategies employed by male educators to mitigate misconceptions and establish their credibility. Participants emphasized the importance of maintaining transparent communication with colleagues and families while adhering to institutional protocols. This approach allowed participants to reinforce their role as competent and trustworthy educators. Some participants shared that modeling professionalism also helped dispel stereotypes about male educators being less nurturing or engaged in childcare duties. According to Joseph and Wright (2016), male educators in early childhood education, particularly in kindergarten, teach diversity among young learners.

Establishing relationships with trusted colleagues, particularly female co-teachers and mentors, was another key strategy. Many participants reported seeking guidance from experienced peers to gain insight into best practices in caregiving and instruction. Some male educators intentionally built alliances with fellow male educators, forming informal support systems to exchange strategies and share experiences. These networks provided a sense of solidarity, helping participants mitigate feelings of marginalization. However, variations emerged — some male educators expressed reluctance to seek peer support, citing concerns that this might further reinforce the perception that they were incapable or dependent on female colleagues.

Moreover, while most participants demonstrated adaptive coping strategies, a few participants encountered challenges that deviated from standard patterns. For example, one participant reported withdrawing emotionally from workplace interactions, expressing that persistent scrutiny from parents and colleagues created feelings of self-doubt and isolation. Conversely, a participant working in a public institution described minimal resistance from peers and parents, emphasizing that gender was rarely an issue in his professional practice. Such cases highlight the influence of institutional culture, leadership support, and social dynamics in shaping male educators' coping experiences.

Given the complex dynamics that male educators face, addressing their experiences requires not only a theoretical understanding but also practical interventions. Research suggests that creating supportive professional networks can help reduce the isolation felt by male educators. For instance, strategies such as male mentorship programs or professional development workshops focused on gender dynamics can empower male teachers to navigate their roles more effectively (Peeters et al. 2015). Encouraging gender diversity in hiring and promoting gender sensitivity in workplace policies could also contribute to a more balanced and inclusive environment (McKeen, 2021).

Theme 2: Profound fulfillment in the profession

The findings revealed that male early childhood educators experienced a deep sense of fulfillment in their profession, driven by their emotional rewards, meaningful connections with children, and a strong sense of purpose. These factors collectively contributed to their professional satisfaction and resilience in a predominantly female workforce.

Many participants highlighted the unfathomable feelings and emotional rewards they gained from nurturing and working with young learners in the field. The feelings of pride, joy, and satisfaction emerged from witnessing children's progress, emphasizing their holistic growth and development. For instance, some participants shared that having an encounter with a learner contributes to reassuring them that their presence as male educators was valued and impactful. The presence of nurturing fathers, father figures, and male educators in early childhood education settings can have a transformative impact. According to Morrison (2019), when the unique

contributions of male educators are recognized and valued, they are more likely to remain engaged and committed. This recognition can increase the number of male educators in the field, contributing to a more gender-balanced workforce and enriching the learning environment.

Building meaningful relationships with children emerged as a powerful source of fulfillment for male educators. Participants described how forming close emotional bonds with young children not only reinforced their commitment to the profession but also countered societal assumptions about their caregiving capabilities. Many participants reported that engaging in play-based learning and storytelling helped them connect with children authentically, allowing them to demonstrate nurturing qualities. One educator remarked, "I found it to be inspiring and enjoyable. I love being able to teach, share knowledge, and work with young children.".

Further, distinct caregiving and teaching styles by male and female educators alike can bring unique benefits to children's development. Rolfe (2006) emphasizes that when children are exposed to varied approaches to nurturing, play, and instruction, they gain a broader understanding of social interactions and diverse learning methods. Many participants saw their role as an opportunity to demonstrate that men can be caring, empathetic, and supportive figures in young children's lives. By offering children a spectrum of interactions with caring adults of both genders, early childhood settings can better meet the developmental needs of all children, ultimately creating more inclusive and supportive learning environments. Participants viewed these contributions as vital to fostering gender inclusivity in early childhood education.

While most participants experienced fulfillment through emotional rewards, connections with children, and a sense of purpose, some expressed frustration stemming from persistent societal biases. For example, one participant described feeling pressure to "prove" his competence, which occasionally overshadowed his positive experiences. These variations underscore the complex and evolving nature of gender perceptions in early childhood education settings. Conversely, a participant working in a private institution reported minimal resistance, attributing his positive experiences to a school culture that actively promoted gender inclusivity and validated their contributions to foster gender equity in early childhood education.

Theme 3: Making a Positive Difference in the Lives of Young Children.

The findings demonstrated that male early childhood educators perceived their roles as essential in shaping young children's development, particularly through role modeling, promoting inclusivity, and instilling values and life skills. These efforts contributed significantly to fostering positive learning environments and challenging traditional gender norms in early childhood education settings.

Male educators emphasized the importance of serving as positive role models for young children. They considered themselves as a father figure to those children who do not have one (Evans et al., 2008). Participants described how they intentionally demonstrated empathy, patience, and responsibility to challenge traditional notions of masculinity. By modeling nurturing behaviors and respectful communication, they aimed to provide young learners with diverse representations of male figures. The benefits of having male role models in early childhood education are numerous and extend well beyond the apparent idea of gender parity in the classroom. Children benefit from a richer and more varied educational experience because male educators frequently contribute viewpoints, energies, and methods (Brownhill, 2014). When it comes to creating a well-balanced classroom environment, male early childhood educators are unique. Because male educators frequently bring a distinct energy and style to their instruction, gender balance is one important effect (Harris & Barnes, 2009). They can foster a more active physical environment, engaging children through movement-based play, problem-solving activities, and exploratory learning.

Further, male educators can serve as relatable role models for fathers, particularly within contexts of single-parent families or households where a father figure is absent (McCormack & Brownhill, 2014). By being present and engaged, male educators may foster a sense of familiarity and connection, encouraging more participation from fathers in school-related activities and bridging the gap between home and school life. This connection can be meaningful for male caregivers who see themselves reflected in the classroom dynamics and are inspired to support their child's education more actively.

Another key strategy in making a positive difference is that the participants actively worked to create inclusive learning environments that embraced gender diversity. Through group interactions, cooperative games, and diverse storytelling practices, male educators encouraged children to value individuality. Several participants mentioned deliberately incorporating stories featuring nurturing male characters or highlighting strong female leads to broaden children's understanding of gender roles. One educator remarked, "I make it a point to use books and activities that show both boys and girls exploring their interests freely, without feeling confined to certain roles." In the study by Reich-Shapiro et al. (2020), male educators view their presence in early childhood education as an opportunity to foster children's social and emotional growth regardless of gender.

Essentially, children benefit greatly from observing and experiencing positive interactions between males and females within the classroom environment. They learn that care, leadership, creativity, and compassion can come from anyone, regardless of gender. These experiences broaden their understanding of relationships and roles within their community. These interaction models respect, collaboration, and equality, teaching children about healthy social dynamics and relationships from an early age. Exposure to positive male-female relationships in school settings can lay the foundation for children to develop healthy interpersonal skills, empathy, and a broader perspective on the roles and contributions of individuals, regardless of gender, in their communities. This balanced representation helps dismantle gender stereotypes and broadens children's understanding of diverse ways of caring, leading, and teaching (Harris & Barnes, 2009).

Although most participants described role modeling, promoting inclusivity, and instilling values as fulfilling aspects of their roles, some reported feeling pressured to fulfill stereotypical roles, such as being tasked with physical activities or discipline rather than nurturing roles. These experiences highlight the ongoing tension between societal perceptions of masculinity and the evolving expectations placed on male educators in early childhood education. Conversely, participants in institutions that actively promoted gender equity reported smoother experiences and greater acceptance.

To further empower male educators in fulfilling various roles, their efforts challenge traditional gender roles, emphasizing the need for educational institutions to provide supportive frameworks that recognize and amplify the contributions of male educators in early childhood education. Schools are encouraged to incorporate training programs emphasizing the value of diverse teaching styles and caregiving approaches.

CONCLUSIONS

According to the findings, this research reveals that male educators in early childhood education are inspired to challenge stereotypes and reshape traditional perceptions of nurturing and caregiving roles, which have been historically dominated dominated by females. By actively assuming these responsibilities, they help change ideas about masculinity, especially the belief that male educators are less caring caregivers in the early childhood education setting. However, this study acknowledges the persistent challenges and societal biases that hinder the widespread acceptance of male educators in this field. Deeply ingrained stereotypes often result in male

educators facing scrutiny, feelings of isolation, and the pressure to consistently demonstrate their competence. These barriers highlight the need for continued advocacy and institutional support to foster gender diversity in early childhood education.

This study contributes to the theoretical understanding of gender dynamics by expanding upon Social Role Theory (Eagly & Woods, 2016) and Hegemonic Masculinity Theory (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). While Social Role Theory suggests that societal expectations reinforce caregiving as a feminine role, this study contradicts these notions by demonstrating that male educators actively engage in nurturing behaviors, thereby challenging traditional assumptions. Additionally, the findings expand on Hegemonic Masculinity Theory by illustrating how male educators reject dominant masculine norms that emphasize authority and emotional detachment, instead embracing care and empathy as integral to their professional identity.

Male educators also recognize the significance of the father figure as a nurturer, which stimulates their dedication to transforming societal expectations. These characteristics show that caregiving is a human trait, not just limited to a specific gender, and enhances diverse learning experiences for children. The study contributes to the theoretical understanding of gender dynamics in early childhood education by offering empirical data on the distinct impact that male educators have on the social and emotional development of young learners. The concept of male educators providing nurturing roles in early childhood education, which includes various caregiving, emotional regulation, and social learning strategies, aligns with existing theories on gender and caregiving. The findings challenge traditional gender theories by showcasing men's ability to nurture, suggesting a need for a broader understanding of gender roles in education.

In practical terms, this research provides valuable insights for educators, administrators, and policymakers in early childhood education on fostering greater inclusion of male educators in the field. This research highlights the importance of offering professional growth and development opportunities tailored to the unique challenges male educators face in predominantly female-focused environments, along with specific approaches to attract and keep more males in early childhood education, focusing on strategies for fostering positive relationships with parents, navigating workplace biases, and promoting their role as nurturing caregivers. Furthermore, by encouraging positive portrayals of male educators, educational institutions and policymakers can establish mentorship programs that provide male educators with peer support and guidance. They can also create gender-diverse learning environments where children can observe positive, cooperative relationships between males and females, which will ultimately contribute a more inclusive early childhood education model. By acknowledging the challenges faced by male educators, challenging traditional gender theories, and proposing actionable steps for institutions and policymakers, this study aims to promote a more inclusive and balanced representation of educators in early childhood education. These findings ultimately advocate for transforming early childhood education into a space where diverse role models are embraced, benefiting both educators and the young learners they guide.

LIMITATION & FURTHER RESEARCH

This study has potential limitations. The sample size was a significant limitation, as it may not have adequately represented the diverse experiences of male educators working in various locales, cultural contexts, or school types. It implies that although the narratives shared by the informants are impactful, they might not accurately reflect the experiences of all male educators.

Furthermore, biases may exist in how experiences were recounted or recalled, as this study primarily relies on participants' testimonies and introspection based on predefined criteria for identifying the participants. Because of this, it is possible that this study did not adequately capture how their roles evolve as they progress through more experienced stages of their careers.

Additionally, cultural norms, workplace regulations, and public perceptions of male educators differ significantly among contexts, which have influenced their experiences in ways that this study did not thoroughly examine. For instance, in more conservative cultural settings, male educators may face heightened scrutiny or mistrust in caregiving roles. In contrast, in more progressive environments, they may encounter fewer barriers and enjoy greater acceptance. In some cultures, traditional gender roles may discourage men from working in early childhood education, while others may embrace male educators as role models for promoting balanced gender representation. Such cultural differences are crucial in understanding the varied experiences of male early childhood educators.

Future researchers should consider involving a considerably larger and more varied group of participants from various cultural and geographic backgrounds to capture a deeper understanding of male early childhood educators. This would enable a deeper and more thorough understanding of the challenges confronted by male educators in diverse contexts and assist in identifying areas where they may require additional support. Future research could also adopt comparative studies that explore how cultural norms shape perceptions of male educators, providing valuable insights into region-specific barriers. Additionally, researchers could examine how male educators' roles, difficulties, and perceptions evolve as they acquire more experience in the field by tracking their professional journeys over an extended period. Exploring the role of support networks, such as peer groups, professional development opportunities, or mentoring, would also help clarify what genuinely influences their success in the early childhood setting. Future researchers could also track them over an extended period. Lastly, researching the perspectives of parents, school leaders, and policymakers would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the systemic factors influencing the experiences of male educators in early childhood education.

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