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One Male Student Teacher's Perception and Experiences of Student Teaching in an Infant Group Care Setting

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Abstract

This qualitative case study explores in-depth how one male student teacher reflected on his care practice with infants and how he described his experiences of working with female mentor teachers. The authors used the teacher's daily journal entries, four individual interviews, and weekly team planning meetings as data sources. The data was collected over 15-week period. Findings revealed that the teacher's caring sense gradually evolved through care practice and that he brought in his authenticity as a teacher, not just as a male teacher, while confronting with and critically reflecting upon himself as a teacher. Also, the weekly team planning meetings helped him build relationship with the female mentor teachers. He positively reflected upon his experiences of collaborative teaching. Implication of the findings is discussed in terms of male students in early childhood teacher education programs.

Introduction

As of 2017, female childcare workers make up 93 % of the entire workforce in the United States (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017). This lack of male teachers has been globally persistent in early childhood education (ECE) throughout time (Drudy, 2008). As a result, there have been concerns about "gendered" (Murray, 1996, p.368) childcare, suggesting that children have been

deprived of balanced opportunities to learn from people who represent all genders (Husam et al., 2019). Several studies attributed low recruitment and retention of early childhood (EC) male teachers to low salary (Shpancer et al., 2019), low social status and the gendered nature of the profession (Bhana & Moosa, 2016), and negative societal perception of male teachers (Ottaviano & Persico, 2019; Shpancer et al., 2019). Moreover, social isolation in a female-dominated workplace is one of their concerns about working at preschools (Anliak & Beyazkurk, 2008). As such, male teachers in early childhood education have been marginalized as 'others' (McGowan, 2016; Zhang & Wang, 2018). Despite all the challenges, when male teachers choose to work in early childhood education settings, their motivation is grounded on their passion and love of children and teaching (Anderson, 2019; Pirard et al., 2015; Xu, 2019).

Recently, researchers investigated the characteristics common to male teachers' practice at preschools. Quality male teachers are reported to share common characteristics with quality female teachers in that male teachers are child-centered, sensitive, responsive, nurturing, loving, compassionate, trustful, patient, playful, and excited about children's learning and curiosity (Bullough, 2015; Carter, 2013). As the understanding of male teachers in ECE has improved recently, there has been an effort to increase the number of male teachers in EC education and care. One of the ways to promote recruitment of male teachers would be to improve EC teacher education programs where prospective male teachers are trained to teach and make career decisions (Nelson & Shkwambi, 2010; Therese & Ayse, 2010; Xu, 2019).

Male Student Teachers' Experiences in Teacher Education Program

Historically male students' enrollment in ECE programs at colleges has been very low, indicating the need for understanding of the male students' experiences in their programs (Therese & Ayes, 2010). Existing studies on male students in the programs show that the students face some challenges during coursework as well as the field experiences. In EC teacher education programs where students are predominantly female, male students become a minority and deal with feelings of isolation and issues of standing out (Xu, 2019), while figuring out "how to make a place for themselves" (Pirard et al., 2015, p.365). Furthermore, field experiences pose more complex challenges to male students. At some childcare programs and schools, male student teachers are prohibited from changing diapers or taking female children to the restroom (Xu, 2019). Some female teachers insist that male student teachers are incapable of caring for young children because of their gender (Beyazkurk, 2006). Some parents question male student teachers' work with their children (Mistry & Sood, 2013) as societal bias against male teachers are still pervasive (Jung, 2012). Thus, male students constantly grapple with a potential suspicion and a risk of being seen as pedophiles (Heikkila & Hellman, 2017; Joseph & Wright, 2016; Mistry & Sood, 2015). Coupled with discriminatory policy against male students, such societal misperception may only exacerbate male students' anxiety and concerns about their behaviors during field experience.

However, the challenges that male students face are rarely addressed in teacher training programs (Pirard et al., 2015). Male students are reported to be lack of proper guidance or support from male mentors or supervisors during student teaching (Battle, 2015; Heikkila & Hellman, 2017; Mistry & Sood, 2016). Consequently, male students have to deal with the challenges they face on their own. Given that field experience is highly influential in students'

career choice (Pirard et al, 2015; Heikkila & Hellman, 2017), it is important to provide male students with field experiences where they are well received and connected with mentors.

Infant Care Practice

In early childhood education, caring is considered critical to professionalism (Brody, 2015) and expected to be a part of teachers' attitudes and interactions with children. In particular, infant/toddler care involves teachers' intimate physical contact with very young children (Jung et al., 2021; Svinth, 2018). Such unique demands may present more challenges to male student teachers, making them vulnerable to societal bias against them. Also, due to the scarcity of infant teachers who are males, the male student teachers in infant group care settings may experience the status of being a minority and a sense of isolation. Subsequently, the challenges and conflicts that the teachers face may become more salient. However, existing studies on male student teachers' field experiences in ECE settings are very limited (Heikkila & Hellman, 2017) and to the best of my knowledge, there is no research on male student teachers in infant group care settings. The purpose of the present study is to explore one male ECE student teacher's views and experiences in infant group care setting during his student teaching. This study is intended to help teacher educators and professionals better understand and support male students and teachers in infant classroom. Research questions are 1) How does a male student teacher perceive his care practice with infants? 2) How does a male student teacher describe his experiences of working with infants and female colleagues?

METHOD

Settings and Participants

Since the focus of the study was to explore in-depth one male student teacher's perception and experiences of working with infants and female colleagues, the present study employed a qualitative case study approach to gain an in-depth understanding of the male student teacher's experiences (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). For "purposeful sampling" (Merriam, 1998, p.61), John (pseudonym), a senior-year male student in an ECE program at a large state university in the United States was deliberately chosen (Patton, 1990). At the beginning of the study, he was in his early 20s and just started his student teaching in an infant room at a university-based child development center. He was six feet tall with a beard and humorous, and loved music, nature, and outdoor activity. He completed 20 hours of work per week over 15 weeks in the infant room. John worked with his mentor teachers, Laura and Amy in the room. On a weekly basis, John had one-hour team planning meetings with the mentors, where they shared their observations and experiences from the past week, addressed any issues and concerns, discussed ways to support children, and planned activities and schedules for the following week.

Data Sources and Data Analysis

Multiple data sources were utilized, including interviews, daily reflective journal, and observations. As a non-participant observer, the researcher observed John working with infants over two days, writing field notes. The semi-structured interviews with John were conducted four times over 15 weeks, each of which lasted for 40-45 minutes and was transcribed later.

Interview questions focused on his reflections on working with infants and his female mentor teachers and on any challenges and issues that he might face. Laura and Amy, his mentor teachers, were also interviewed for 45 minutes about their experiences of working with John. Besides, the one-hour weekly team meetings were observed over the semester, and, in total, six meetings were videorecorded. Detailed anecdotes of each meeting, which included the teachers' dialogue verbatim, were transcribed. The observations provide information on John's perception of his practice with the infants, as well as how he worked with his female mentor teachers. His daily journal with 66 entries was collected. John used the journal to vent his feelings and reflect on his mistakes/challenges, his pride/accomplishment, and his specific interactions with infants. Thus, the journal aided in understanding of John more holistically, from his emotional responses to his significant moments in day-to-day practice, which would be difficult to reveal through observation alone.

Data analysis was guided by the research questions (Merriam, 1998). The researcher read and re-read the manuscripts of the four interviews and his journal while paying attention to how he described and reflected on his work with infants and teachers. The researcher watched the recorded weekly meetings and read the manuscripts multiple times. During this process, color-coding was done on data and the relationship among the independent codes was written on a separate sheet. Also, the researcher compared all data chronologically to see whether any emerging patterns changed over time. This process helped look closely at the context of each code and themes while merging some patterns and identify new patterns.

Results

The findings show that, although John started with a lack of confidence in his ability to care for infants, he demonstrated capabilities of providing quality care practice, being responsive and sensitive to each infant's needs and interest. Overtime, John evolved as a caring person, being genuinely interested in delivering quality experiences for infants. Although John was the only male teacher in the infant room, he perceived himself as equal to his female mentor teachers, working collaboratively and professionally with open communication.

Practicing a Sense of Caring

John's mentor teacher, Laura, highly regarded his ability to care for infants. When asked about John's work with infants, Laura said, "He does really well. His language and communication with them is really good…He seems to talk to them in a caring way, but not too cutesy...and they (infants) love him!" Yet, she recalled his first day, saying with smile "We were really nervous about him... During the orientation, he was like, "I don't want to be here, and I want to get out!" He came in with more negative attitude and idea of what it was." John said in a later interview that his lack of experience with infants made him feel overwhelmed because he "did not even know how to hold a child." He wrote in his journal about his second day,

> "I'm good with kids, but not as good with babies…One girl who is particularly fussy would start crying and I would be at a loss not knowing what to do because I did not know the problem."

However, under the center's indiscriminatory gender-equal policy toward all teachers, John gained many opportunities to fully engage in the care practice such as diaper change, napping, or feeding from the first week of his student teaching. After his first try with diaper change, he referred to that day as "Big day!" and positively reflected on basic care in his journal (Day 4), as "complicated" but "interesting" and "easy to get in a rhythm to." John also managed sanitary-related tasks such as cleaning and washing. At times, he mentioned how "draining" these tasks were, yet he perceived them as an essential part of infant group care. He wrote, "Learning these routines is very important for managing the whole classroom" (Day 13). Through the care-related tasks, John gained more focused one-on-one time with the infants and gradually realized a sense of responsibility for the infants, striving to meet their needs and to support their development. He wrote,

> "The kids are growing on me now…and I am beginning to learn each of their personalities which has greatly alleviated the struggle to [identify] the problem and help with [their developmental] goal" (Day 7).

Throughout the first half of the semester, John was deeply concerned about each child's emotional/physical well-being, often reflecting in his journal on details about each child's habits, behaviors, cues, temperament, and his responses to them. In the following journal entry, he shared a sense of relief and pride when he was able to recognize an infant's needs and ease her discomfort.

> "I made progress in reading what Isabel (the youngest) was thinking today…She was fine for a while but eventually I noticed her acting irregularly…so I…got her bottle. By the time I had gotten the bottle…, she was crying pretty hard. Since I timed it right, she spent hardly any time crying. I think this is cool because I was able to read what she wanted before she actually started crying and managed to prepare for it." (Day 11)

In his later interview, John explained more about Isabel's cues:

> "She wasn't crying a lot, but she wasn't super happy, there was something [different about her behavior]. She was not really playing with things, she was just sitting there, she was unhappy, like not content, but it was not really a problem…For some reason I could just tell."

Through trial and error in meeting each infant's needs during care practice, he gained better understanding of each child and became more sensitive and responsive to infants' cues. Moreover, he came to value the care practice as a way to build a relationship with them. He said, "I don't want to just do the routine and stare at a baby…It is kind of a bonding thing cause it's just like them and me" (Interview 4). Toward the middle of the semester, he was no longer anxious about infants' expression of stress/discomfort. Observation of his practice also showed that he was very comfortable with caring for infants while being warm and nurturing in his interactions with infants. He believed that his support of individual infants would encourage them to trust him, which in turn would affect the quality of their daily experiences. He said, "When they know and trust that I can help them, they can do a lot more than they could [without this trust]" (Interview 3).

Over time, John's interest in and concerns about individual infants became more personal. In his journal, he expressed his concerns about infants' sickness or absences, thinking about ways to keep them happy when they return. At times, he became excited when he noted individual infant's developmental milestones, whether small or major, hoping to see their more advanced growth before he would leave them at the end of the semester. Although he started with anxiety and concern about his ability to care for infants, he came to deeply care about them. At the end of the semester when he was asked about his strength as a teacher, he answered, "I feel like I respect them, I understand them, they understand me."

Feeling safe and comfortable working with female mentor teachers

When asked about any challenges in working with infants as a male teacher, John pointed to one issue,

> "I think it is a little bit weird because, especially in schools, I have to worry about things that girl teachers don't have to worry about. [For instance] if a kid goes in a bathroom and is in there for 35 minutes, a normal teacher could just walk in, yell at him and walk out. I have to worry about what it would be thought as. There are a lot of little things like that. If you make any wrong move, it could be hammered onto you, where I don't think it would be nearly as much as if you were a female teacher. But actually, my day-to-day life working here, no, it's not a big deal for me. I think it would be cool if Steve (a male teacher at the center) [were my mentor]; it would be cool to be in his room, but it didn't happen". (Interview 2)

Although John himself did not experience any suspicion or discriminatory treatment during student teaching, he was aware of societal perception against male teachers. Therefore, he considered that having a male mentor teacher would help him because "it could be a more direct example of what I could be doing" (Interview 2).

In regard to working with female colleagues, John pointed to some differences in communication between him and his female colleagues. Yet, he felt these were more of a personal matter and stressed commonalities that he shared with them as teachers. He said, "I'm a lot more blunt than some of the interns…[but] I don't think there's a gender difference in how we work." Observation of the weekly team meetings showed collaborative and professional relationship between the mentor teachers and John. During the meetings, the mentor teachers often checked in with John about how he was doing, what his concerns might be, and how they could support him. John seemed comfortable and candid with the mentor teachers, openly communicating about his concerns and asking a lot of questions without much hesitation. Some of his responses were: "I just don't know how to do it at all with a one-year old"; "Is it wrong to do…?"; "How would you do that?"; "I don't know how they're going to respond to it…I feel like it would help to have you [Laura] or Amy there"; "I don't really know what a language lesson is. Can you tell me…"

It also should be noted that John and the mentors at times shared casual conversation about their personal lives during the meetings. He sometimes made jokes or mimicked the infants in somewhat exaggerated ways, which made the teachers laugh, breaking up the tension of the

meeting. He reflected that the weekly meetings helped him build better relationship with the mentors and work better with infants. He said in the interview,

> "Throughout the day… we have the get-the work-done type of conversations whereas in the meetings, it's still work, but it's not all work. There's stories and it's fun and you kind of get to learn the personality of each person. I feel like I know Amy much better now than I did at the beginning of the year… so the meetings helped with learning the teacher as well as what to do [in class]".

His mentor teachers, both Laura and Amy, also considered that the meeting allowed time for them to learn about John, to build both personal and professional relationship with him, and eventually to help mentor him. For them, the meeting was not only about 'planning schedules' but about making space where they connected with and supported him. Amy said,

> "I really like being with everyone at once without babies. A lot of times during the day, it's so busy. So, it's (the meeting) a time to settle down to make sure, especially that they (John and his peer student teacher) don't need help with anything. I think sometimes it's hard for them to come to us with questions. So that's like setting a time to be able to ask questions…and to be able to check in on how they're doing."

Laura also pointed to the meeting as a space for open communication. She said,

> "I like the informality of it (the weekly meetings). It's nice to get to know your people that you are working so closely with, on a more informal basis. Especially with interns, I think it helps because they feel more comfortable saying anything (during the meetings) that they are struggling with or frustrated. They are more open up about those things."

Furthermore, Laura, who was aware of John's initial lack of motivation and confidence in working with infants, emphasized the importance of supportive mentoring for him. She said,

> "I guess being understandable of their mistakes, letting them know that we anticipate them to make mistakes and that it's okay. I always give examples of some mistakes that I had when I was an intern and my first year working here."

Observation of the weekly meetings evidenced that, throughout the semester, the mentor teachers showed willingness to support John through positively responding to his ideas and incorporating them into curriculum, listening and respecting John's reflection on infants and practice, offering knowledge and experiences to John's questions, and accepting John's request of help. With the mentors' support, John actively participated in the meetings, willing to jump into discussion with the mentor teachers, provided his commentary on their reflection, and collaboratively developed curriculum for infants' development. Laura found John's evolving positive attitude toward working with infants over time. She said, "I think that he's seeing them as something he can benefit from. I think he does enjoy the children and having fun with them." Overall, John positively reflected on working with his two mentors, valuing open communication and collaborative teamwork. When there was a new incoming female teacher in his room, he was hopeful of working with her as well. He wrote,

> "I liked learning from Laura because she seemed very skilled at what she does. I like working with Amy because she is younger and is still working out how to run a room. When problems come up, we will talk through them. I enjoy this type of collaboration so I am curious to see the type of experiences a new person will bring" (Day 41).

Discussions

Male ECE students have been reported to face many difficulties particularly in the field experiences. Yet, the present study suggests that, within supportive environment for student teaching, the male student teacher is capable of navigating complex challenges inherent in working with the youngest group of children while evolving and growing in his practice of care/education. Also, positive mentoring and open communication with mentors are essential to help him overcome some of the societal prejudice he may encounter. The findings will be further discussed in terms of male students in early childhood teacher education as follows.

A Caring Sense Evolves through Care Practice

The findings show that John's sense of care gradually evolved through intimate care practice. Within a context where there was no discriminatory policy against male teachers, John was able to be deeply involved in a wide range of care practice, having physical contacts with the infants and dealing with the infants' intense emotional/physical needs. Meanwhile, he gradually gained a better understanding of each child, formed relationship with them, gained a strong sense of responsibility, and became genuinely interested in each infant's well-being. Once he gained a sense of caring, it was powerful enough to permeate throughout his daily practice and interactions with children. He strived to offer meaningful activities aligned with infants' interests while being mindful of infants' individual needs and development. Commitment to children's well-being, to education of children, and to instilling values are all types of caring in the spectrum of teaching (Scurfield, 2017). Unlike social prejudice against male teachers, this study evidence male teacher's quality caregiving practice and his capability in this regard if they are given full trust and opportunities to fully focus on practicing care for infants.

According to one study (Bullough, 2015), a male assistant teacher at a Head Start program reflected that his work with children helped him become more "sensitive, gentler, even more fun" (p.17). Similarly, the present study suggests that experiences of care practice in infant group care settings may influence the way male teachers perceive care and that their sense of care may be emerged from their sustained involvement in intimate care practice.

Aware of Societal Prejudice against Male Teachers

The findings show that, even within an environment where John was provided with trust and full responsibility in the care practice, he was keenly aware of societal bias in his work. This indicates how deeply the social prejudice is pervaded across the society, including male teachers themselves. Existing studies show that when male teachers are concerned about any potential of gender-related accusations against them, they become more cautious when working with children (Bullough, 2015, Thorpe et al., 2018; Scurfield, 2017). Given that infant care requires a high degree of physical contact (Recchia, 2012), male teachers' fear of societal prejudice may be

amplified and thus may limit the degree of their daily interactions with young children (Xu, 2019), directly affecting the quality of the children's experiences. Several studies report that, out of such fear and concerns, male student teachers seek out male mentors to find creative strategies for the gender-related challenges (Ottavian & Persico, 2019), which is also echoed by John in the present study. Therefore, it is necessary for early childhood teacher education programs to provide an opportunity prior to or during the students' field experience that male students can connect with male teachers to seek out possible solutions and mentorship. Also, shared understanding, deep empathy, and a sense of urgency regarding these issues must be established among program faculty, supervisors, mentor teachers, center/school directors, and community so that male students can practice in the field with a sense of security and confidence.

Supportive and Relationship-Based Mentoring Pivotal to Male Student Teacher's Sense of Belonging

Several studies report that male students had difficulties to seek help or recognize any challenges they might have (Walker, 2018). In contrast, John, in the present study, was willing to share his concerns with his mentors and explicitly ask for their support. Moreover, he valued the collaborative teamwork and open communication he had with his female mentors. These findings may be attributed to the supportive teaching context. Both mentor teachers provided positive and consistent mentoring support for John, which has manifested throughout the meetings over one semester. Furthermore, the findings indicate how important the regular communication and relationship between mentor teachers and student teachers is to male student teacher's sense of trust and belongings within the female-dominant workplace.

Previous studies report that acceptance from teachers in the field affects male student teachers' positive self-esteem (Beyazkurk, 2006). Also, collegiality and collaborative culture at workplace can be supportive to male teachers when they face challenges (Jung, 2012). The present study suggests that field experiences, particularly for male students, should provide an environment where male students continuously engage in communication with their mentors to address the students' concerns, questions, and ideas. These productive interactions may enable male students to feel a sense of belonging, while alleviating any possible sense of isolation, tension, or challenges.

Conclusion

Unique demands inherent in preschool settings pose more challenges to male student teachers than any other education settings, which leads to lack of motivation to pursue their careers in preschools. To encourage more recruitment of male teachers in this setting, the first step should be to provide supports and opportunities for male student teachers to have positive and successful experiences through field experiences.

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