

Developing and Sustaining a Gender-Balanced Early Childhood Teaching Profession



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ABSTRACT: There is a need for gender representation, equality, inclusion, and professional balance in the Early Childhood Education teaching profession just the way it is done in other professions. A mixed team in the provisions for young children has the potential to contribute to a new culture in childcare, with men and women dividing the tasks evenly between them. This is an important step towards equal opportunities for men and women, in which the future generation will also be involved. This study examined developing and sustaining a genderbalanced early childhood teaching profession. The explanatory sequential design of a mixedmethod approach was adopted for this study which involves the integration of quantitative and qualitative research approaches where the qualitative method is designed to further explain the quantitative results. In this study, the quantitative approach was explored more extensively than the qualitative one. The qualitative data was used in the subsequent interpretation for clarification of the results from the quantitative data analysis. In light of the findings from the study, it is recommended that the education workforce must challenge stereotypes and demonstrates gender equality opportunities for young children, and provides them with a more accurate reflection or example of the gender mix of their community. Training programmes, conferences, and school-to-school workshops will be organized by the researcher and other experts in the field of early childhood education to sensitize schools, educational recruiting firms, and institutions about the importance of developing and sustaining a gender-balanced early childhood teaching profession. Also, schools should encourage more participation of fathers in academic and non-academic activities so they can be more involved, and the children will in turn gain and experience substantial support.

KEYWORDS: Early Childhood Education, Teaching Profession, Gender-Balanced Profession, Inclusion, Teachers, Education.

INTRODUCTION

Traditionally, the profession of Early Childhood Education has been observed and categorized as ‘women’s work’. This ideology links and equates early childhood care to mothering, encouraging the notion of gender that suggests that women are naturally born with the ability and skills to care thus, linking caring to feminine. Females have been perceived as the perfect fit for this role, and a man wouldn’t have a place to stay or find it interesting to do. This could be connected to the natural biological connection that exists between a mother and a child. Early Childhood Education (ECE), also known as nursery education, is a branch of education theory that relates to teaching children (formally and informally) from birth up to the age of eight. Traditionally, this is up to the equivalent of third grade. Working with children in the ECE centers requires sensitivity, emotions, creativity, and care, and these characteristics are seen as feminine traits. (Sargent, 2000) describes how the male body gives rise to notions that are different from those suggested by the female body. While women’s bodies are associated with loving care, men’s bodies instead evoke thoughts of risk and danger. Early childhood practitioners generally believe that females are more naturally inclined toward caring for children than males are (Sanders, 2002). Affirming this perception makes males in the childcare sector, unsuitable and inappropriate and therefore, are not viewed or considered to be natural candidates in the childcare field. The number of female employees in the early years’ education and workforce, is significantly higher than the number of male employees (Early Years Alliance Gender Pay Gap Report, 2018). The predominance of women in the sector is striking and has seemed resistant to several approaches to changing it. This implies that if Early Childhood Education, especially Pre-primary or Preschool Education, would achieve its set goals for the overall development of children, it would involve the effort of stakeholders as well as caregivers regardless of their gender. But this has not been the case as there has been gender imbalance in the preschool teaching profession and feminization of the profession all over the world. (Mukuna & Motsotso, 2011).

The purpose of the research was to examine the impact of developing and sustaining a gender-balanced early childhood education teaching profession on the teachers, learners, and parents. The perception of gender roles in our world strongly affects the presence of the male gender in early childhood education and influences learning opportunities for children. This includes ideologies and

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discourses on gender and gender roles, mostly influenced by the patriarchal power relations in our society, and refers to a widely shared perspective that sees childcare as a woman's traditional role in society.

The problem is that the reason for the gender imbalance in the early childhood teaching profession, which is resistant to several approaches to change, can be due to certain factors which are often mostly a result of perceptions and social conditioning. The perception of gender roles in our world strongly affects the presence of the male gender in Early Childhood Education and influences learning opportunities for children. This includes ideologies and discourses on gender and gender roles, mostly influenced by the patriarchal power relations in our society, and refers to a widely shared perspective that sees childcare as a woman's traditional role in society (Penn et al, 1997; Cameron, 1999). Persistent gender imbalance in the teaching profession has raised a few concerns, and countries such as the United Kingdom have implemented policies encouraging the recruitment of male teachers to address the growing "feminization" of the profession (OECD, 2015a). The deficiency in the full involvement of male teachers can be attributed to several factors such as low wages, discriminating working conditions, poor societal acceptance, and lack of parental understanding. With so many reasons for having a gender-balanced early childhood education learning environment, more research must be done on its benefits for the children's growth, development, and learning socially, emotionally, physically, and intellectually, as well as for the benefits of the teachers, schools, and parents; especially the father.

The objectives of the research were primarily, to examine the concept of developing and sustaining a gender-balanced early childhood teaching profession. Firstly, to elicit male and female teachers' perspectives on working in the early childhood teaching profession. What are teachers' perceptions of working in the field of early childhood education teaching? Secondly, to analyze the role of early childhood education teachers in the profession. What are the roles early childhood education teachers can play in the early childhood teaching profession? Thirdly, to investigate the impact of a gender-balanced early childhood teaching profession on fathers' involvement in child care. How a gender-balanced teaching environment can promote fathers' involvement in childcare? Finally, to determine the impact of gender identity influence on children's growth, development, and learning. How do understanding gender identity influence children's social, intellectual, physical, and emotional growth, development, and learning experiences?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Many Western societies have believed that women are more nurturing than men. While these views remain dominant in many spheres of society, alternative perspectives on traditional beliefs about gender roles have gained increasing support in the twenty-first century (Amy 2003). Cameron, Moss, and Owen use the concept of 'gender' as the various characteristics and skills that are ascribed by a culture to men and women. Gender differentiates itself from sex which refers solely to the biological differences between men and women. Gender and sex are strongly linked to each other by the fact that the biologically determined sex will define which gender role (masculine or feminine) society expects a person to play (PEETERS, 2007). The roles of men and women have been segregated since the beginning of public education in westernized societies (Skelton, Francis & Smulyan, 2006). Therefore, the Early Childhood profession has a long time, remained firmly rooted within an exclusive feminine 'vocational habitus' which refers to the process of orientation to a particular identity or a sense of what makes the right person for the job (Vincent et al, 2009; Colley et al, 2003). Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) builds on care and education, founded upon the notion that taking care of and educating young children have always been 'women's work' (Cameron, Moss, & Owen 1999; Cameron 2001).

There are many noticeable differences between teachers, not to mention between male and female teachers. The question is about if gender makes a difference in teaching style, approach to play, and learning outcomes. (Zhang, 2017). Brandes et al. (2015) show that men and women react differently in the way they perceive and react to children's play interests. Sandseter (2014) reports that men are more relaxed regarding the wild and risky play of children. Men are generally more willing to engage in rough-and-tumble play with children, especially boys; this is true for fathers as well as for male ECE workers (Flanders et al., 2009; Pellegrini & Smith, 1998; Richartz, 2015; Storli & Sandseter, 2017). There are substantial literature and related articles on the impact male teachers working alongside their female counterparts in the early childhood profession will have on the children, socially disadvantaged and 'absent fathered' home setting of some children. In particular, the lack of male educators in ECE impacts negatively on boys. As research points to women favoring girls and reinforcing feminine attributes, boys may be currently disadvantaged (Cooney & Bittner, 2001; Farquhar, 2005). According to MacNaughton and Newman (2001), male educators can induct boys into masculinity and may help those who are lacking in positive male role models at home.

There is much research on the benefits of equally engaging both males and females in the early childhood teaching profession and it focuses more on the benefits to children. It is suggested that a mixed and diverse early years education workforce challenges stereotypes and demonstrates gender equality for young children and provides them with a more accurate reflection or example of the gender mix of their community and the world around them as the lack of men would only serve to strengthen established gender stereotypes. The quality of childcare is enhanced as the children are introduced to different dynamics and different styles of caring, playing, and instructing (Rolfe, 2006; Jensen, 1996). Having men engage in a caring and nurturing role, has a particular effect on improving children's behavior and relationship with others. Children learn to envision masculinity differently and are encouraged

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especially boys, to develop an ethic of caring and in the future, consider careers outside the traditional gender boundaries (Rolfe, 2006; Ashcraft et al, 2006). One of the results of a national survey also demonstrates that children who have solo mothers need a male role model so that boys learn what it is to be a man and girls learn how to relate to men (Farquhar, 2012).

The majority of findings on developing and sustaining a gender-balanced early childhood teaching profession also indicate that the attitudes of employers, colleagues, parents, and the society at large also have an impact on the situation of fewer male gender in the teaching profession. These social attitudes are strongly rooted in the gendered nature of the childcare workforce. Men in the early years' profession often are faced with their sexuality being questioned. It is suggested that men with highly masculine behavior are less likely to be comfortable with or be able to implement the attributes or characteristics common to Early Childhood Education (Robinson, 1981). Males in the early childhood teaching profession, who exhibit the characteristics or attributes needed such as emotions, sensitivity, and creativity are often viewed as unusual and at worst, an object of suspicion (Smedley, 2007). They are subject to negative reactions from people who feel that childcare is not a 'normal' job for a man and are suspected of having perverse sexual intentions (Rolfe, 2005). These widely accepted stereotypical notions of what it means to be a man seriously cause a huge hesitation from men when it comes to joining the early childhood education workforce. The media also plays a role, as the predominance of media portrayals of men as child molesters, has led to men being viewed with suspicion by parents or colleagues. School administrators and parents are very skeptical about having men in nursery settings and have expressed hesitation towards it as a result of their concerns for child safety against pedophile contact or sexual harassment.

The role of a father in the family has significantly changed (i.e. the involvement of fathers in the early periods of their children's lives) and at the same time, the public perception of what role, males should assume in education and care of very young children in educational settings. Studies have proven that children in preschools who experienced substantial support from parents are most likely to get ahead in their academics and positive behavioral management, thereby developing to their full potential than their peers, and there are even many benefits when fathers are more engaging and deliberate about how their children are fairing with school works. However, the inquiry is on how the involvement of male teachers encouraged and influenced more fathers' participation in the child's learning process. A US survey on fathers' involvement in Early Childhood programs (MFFN, 2011) built on the recognition of increasing participation of fathers in all areas of their children's upbringing, including early childhood education and care. The authors conclude that a lack of male staff is an important reason for the poor involvement of fathers in ECE, besides the fundamental problem of the limited time resources of fathers. More male staff, and males qualifying on programs specifically for fathers, are seen as key factors for better involvement: "The presence of male staff members and volunteers provides a clue that this is a male-friendly environment where other males are welcome and expected" (MFFN, 2011, p. 16). Male participation in early childhood education will encourage and support fathers in their involvement and understanding of the early years' stages, developmental milestones, and effective childcare practices. Male educators can develop a good relationship with fathers and provide supportive friendship, especially to those that are single parents. This could help children and families connect their homes with centers and thereby enhance children's learning and development (Bittner & Cooney, 2003). Today, there has been a large shift in attitude among fathers; they are often more engaged in the lives of their children and this has probably helped parents and grandparents to see that having more male educators for their children is a very good thing (Farquhar, 2012).

Kahn (2005) suggested that the presence of male educators could help fathers feel more relaxed in a predominantly female environment as they may perceive early years setting to be female-only spaces and find them quite intimidating (Lloyd et al, 2003). The acceptance of vital roles men play in the lives of children is rapidly becoming widely accepted in our society. In recent times, men are more encouraged and appreciated for the significant part they play in the growth, development, and learning experiences of children. The truth is that children would benefit from being cared for by a man as well as by a woman. The one experience that a female caregiver cannot provide is that of a male role model. When boys lack the experience of men who are caring and nurturing, the message they receive is that it's not an important trait for males to have. It is men who commit most of the violence in our society. Men comprise over 90% of the prison population in the US. Because of these early experiences which do not include significant male involvement, boys learn very early in life that caring for children is not an activity men engage in. On the other hand, girls learn that caring for children is their exclusive responsibility and that they should not expect men to contribute. How might our society be different if young children's experience included caring, nurturing men as well as women? (Louis, 1995).

There are substantial literature and related articles on the impact male teachers working alongside their female counterparts in the early childhood profession will have on the children, socially disadvantaged and 'absent fathered' home setting of some children. There is relevant research on the benefits of equally engaging both males and females in the early childhood teaching profession and it focuses more on the benefits to children. It is suggested that a mixed and diverse early years education workforce challenges stereotypes and demonstrates gender equality for young children and provides them with a more accurate reflection or example of the gender mix of their community and the world around them as the lack of men would only serve to strengthen established gender stereotypes. The quality of childcare is enhanced as the children are introduced to different dynamics and different styles of caring, playing, and instructing (Rolfe, 2006; Jensen, 1996). Having men engaged in a caring and nurturing role has a particular effect in improving children's behavior and relationship with others. Children learn to envision masculinity differently and are encouraged

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especially boys, to develop an ethic of caring and in the future, consider careers outside the traditional gender boundaries (Rolfe, 2006; Ashcraft et al, 2006). Farquhar's studies also tell us that more male educators are needed in ECE as positive male figures for children in the context of the economic and social changes that have made them absent from or marginal in many children's home lives (1997; Farquhar et al., 2006).

METHODOLOGY

Early childhood teachers and parents in ten (10) different schools were selected for this study. These parents make up those the group whose children were admitted to classes that cater to the growth, development, and learning experiences of children between the ages of 2 and 8 years old.

An explanatory sequential design of a mixed-method approach was used for this study which involves the integration of quantitative and qualitative research approaches where the qualitative method is designed to further explain the quantitative results (Creswell, 2015, 2018; Patricia, 2017). In this study, the quantitative approach was explored more extensively than the qualitative one. The quantitative approach involves the researcher designing a questionnaire to cull data from the study's participants while the qualitative research approach involves the researcher designing an unstructured interview guide to interviewing the participants face-to-face to cull data with the aid of recording devices and field notes. The explanatory sequential design can be expressed as QUAN + qual. (That is, the quantitative approach was given more priority over the qualitative in the study). On the other hand, the quantitative approach had primary status while the qualitative approach was given secondary status in the study. Thus, the qualitative data was used in the subsequent interpretation for clarification of the results from the quantitative data analysis.

Sampling techniques

The research carried out a background investigation on the learning environment for children and the disposition of teachers in the selected schools to find out if the status of the practice of a gender-balanced teaching environment model, their perceptions about having male teachers in the workforce, and the status of fathers' engagement in the school activities. However, for this study, the researcher selected fifty (50) participants from schools. They were selected from 10 (ten) different schools. The selection of the schools was randomly done without any bias. The number of male and female teachers taken from each school was ten (10). The parents were chosen randomly from the ten (10) schools. The criteria used for this selection of the parents were that they all have children in the schools and with an understanding or experience about actively engaging in their child's school activities especially as a father.

Instrument

Two sets of an instrument; a questionnaire and conducted unstructured interviews were used to gather the needed data. The first instrument, the questionnaire was titled "Questionnaire on Developing and Sustaining a Gender-Balanced Early Childhood Teaching Profession (QDSGBETP)". The instrument had a total of 20 items, the response type adopted for the instrument was a four-point Likert Scale 4 = Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Disagree (D), Strongly disagree (SD). The second instrument, an unstructured interview guide was used to interview the fathers whose children were in the selected schools and admitted to classes that cater to the growth, development, and learning experiences of children between the ages of 2 and 8 years old.

Data Analysis

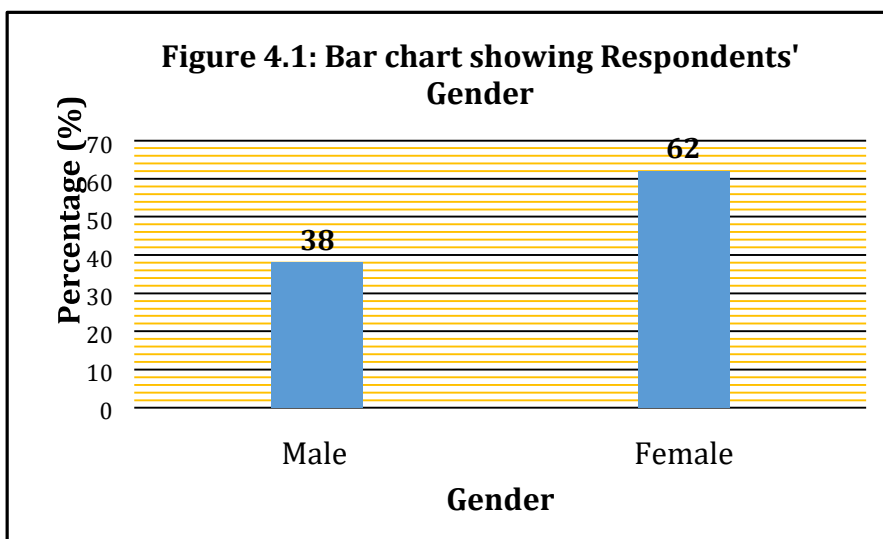
Data collected were analyzed using descriptive statistics of frequency count, percentage, mean, and standard deviation for the research questions that were asked in the study. In addition, inferential statistics of independent and paired sample t-tests were used to test the null hypothesis formulated at a 0.05 level of significance. The software used for the analysis was the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 23. The qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis since the interviews were conducted based on specified themes. The data were subjected to reduction via transformation, summarisation, and transcription. Thereafter, they were analysed.

RESULTS AND ANALYSES

The data gathered from the participants are categorized and summarized as follows.

Category A: Demographic Analyses of Quantitative Data

Demographic profiles of respondents are detailed as follows. The table shows that fifty respondents were involved in this study. Out of the 50 respondents, 19(38.0%) were male while the remaining who constituted 31(62.0%) were female. The result from this table implies that the female respondents were more than male ones.



Category B: Quantitative Analyses

Table 4.2. Male and Female Teachers' Perception of Working in the Early Childhood Education Teaching Profession

Items	SD	D	A	SA	Mean (\bar{x})	Std.D
The early childhood teaching profession should be a predominantly female environment.	13 (26.0)	16 (32.0)	8 (16.0)	13 (26.0)	2.42	1.14
A gender-balanced teaching environment enhances team work among teachers.	2 (4.0)	5 (10.0)	15 (30.0)	28 (56.0)	3.38	.83
There are no significant roles that male teachers can play in early childhood education.	24 (48.0)	19 (38.0)	6 (12.0)	1 (2.0)	1.68	.77
Male teachers should enjoy unbiased work environment in early childhood teaching profession like their female counterparts.	8 (16.0)	5 (10.0)	16 (32.0)	21 (42.0)	3.00	1.09
Men in the early childhood teaching profession are often faced with their sexuality being questioned.	2 (4.0)	5 (10.0)	25 (50.0)	18 (36.0)	3.18	.77
Weighted Average					2.73	

4.2 shows the male and female teachers' perceptions of working in the early childhood education teaching profession. The table shows that the respondents disagreed with these items: the early childhood teaching profession should be a predominantly female environment (= 2.42) and there are no significant roles that male teachers can play in early childhood education (= 1.68). However, it shows further that the respondents agreed with the following items: a gender-balanced teaching environment enhances teamwork among teachers (= 3.38), male teachers should enjoy an unbiased work environment in the early childhood teaching profession like their female counterparts (= 3.00) and men in the early childhood teaching profession are often faced with their sexuality being questioned (= 3.18). Meanwhile, based on the value of the weighted average (2.73 out of 4.00 maximum value that can be obtained), which falls within the decision value for positive perception, it can be inferred that male and female teachers' perception of working in the early childhood education teaching profession is positive which implies that early childhood education male and female teachers have a similar perception of working in the early childhood education teaching profession.

Table 4.3. The Roles Early Childhood Education Teachers can Play in the Early Childhood Teaching Profession

Items	SD	D	A	SA	Mean (\bar{x})	Std.D	Remark
Female teachers are more caring, outgoing and will do a better job in nurturing and safeguarding children.	9 (18.0)	11 (22.0)	17 (34.0)	13 (26.0)	2.68	1.06	<i>Accepted</i>

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The quality of teachers in early childhood education strengthens children's social skills, learning styles and behaviour.	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	7 (14.0)	43 (86.0)	3.86	.35	<i>Accepted</i>
A gender-balanced teaching profession will promote all stakeholders' level of interest in early childhood education.	0 (0.0)	7 (14.0)	21 (42.0)	22 (44.0)	3.30	.71	<i>Accepted</i>
The gender of teachers in early childhood teaching profession influences how children learn.	5 (10.0)	23 (46.0)	13 (26.0)	9 (18.0)	2.52	.91	<i>Accepted</i>
Male teachers in the gender-balanced early childhood teaching profession will serve as role models.	0 (0.0)	6 (12.0)	22 (44.0)	22 (44.0)	3.32	.68	<i>Accepted</i>

4.3 shows the roles early childhood education teachers can play in the early childhood teaching profession. The table shows that the respondents agreed with all the suggested roles as shown on the table. Meanwhile, based on the result from the table and in line with the decision value, it can be inferred that the roles early childhood education teachers can play in the early childhood teaching profession are: female teachers are more caring, outgoing and will do a better job in nurturing and safeguarding children, the quality of teachers in early childhood education strengthens children's social skills, learning styles and behaviour, a gender-balanced teaching profession will promote all stakeholders' level of interest in early childhood education, the gender of teachers in early childhood teaching profession influences how children learn and male teachers in the gender-balanced early childhood teaching profession will serve as role models. The overall result implies that early childhood education male and female teachers perform similar roles in the early childhood education teaching profession.

Category C: Qualitative Results

Table 4.4 presents the themes of how a gender-balanced teaching environment can promote fathers' involvement in childcare.

Purpose for Data Collection	Themes
How gender-balanced teaching environment can promote fathers' involvement in childcare.	Gender-balanced teaching environment
	Fathers' involvement in child care

Majority of the responses gathered from all the fathers interviewed revealed that the fathers are very clueless about the importance of their roles in school activities. In fact, about 15% of them confessed that they find it difficult to relate with female teachers exclusively because they often feel that such tasks should be assigned to their wives. Again, many of the fathers who could be rated as 20% posited that if there were more male teachers in the ECE school environment, they will be encouraged to participate and relate well. In buttressing this claims, two of the respondents, for instance, stated that; "...as for me, I must say that most times the schools don't usually promote a gender-balanced and welcoming environment, especially through activities run in the school. As a result of this, I will advise that schools should try to do better in this aspect and come up with activities that will encourage both parents."

"...yes, I agreed that developing and sustaining a gender-balanced teaching environment for young children in ECE will expose the children to more learning opportunities so that they won't be afraid to take risks. We need children who will be trained in tough ways and ready for the world from an early stage."

Based on the responses of the fathers, it can be inferred that a gender-balanced teaching environment can promote fathers' involvement in childcare if schools come up with sustainable activities that will encourage both parents.

4.5 shows the themes of how understanding gender identify influences children’s growth, development, and learning experience (Socially, Intellectually, Physically, and Emotionally)

Purpose for Data Collection	Themes
How understanding gender identity influences children’s growth, development, and learning experience socially, intellectually, physically, and emotionally.	Gender identity Children’s growth, development, and learning experience (socially, intellectually, physically and emotionally).

In a quest to explore the understanding of how gender identity influence learning in children and its impact, the participants submitted divergent views. It was noted that some of the participants who could be rated as 45% submit that teachers and administrators could be more mindful of engaging fathers and make it a point of focus to get them engaged intentionally. Some of the respondents who are mothers had the following to say,

“...to me, it won't be comfortable having a male teacher around my child between the age of 2 & 8 because there are potential perpetrators who can abuse the child. Although, having male teachers will provide emotional support for children who don't have a father figure at home.”

“...although, male teachers are great models to children but there are many cases of child abuse which are often caused by male teachers. So, I can't categorically say that male teachers should 100% dominate the early childhood education profession.”

Meanwhile, based on the responses of the mother on their understanding of gender identity influence children’s growth, development, and learning experience socially, intellectually, physically, and emotionally it can be inferred that the mothers perceived that many a time, male teacher around young children serve as potential perpetrators to them.

DISCUSSION

Advocating and establishing the need for gender representation, equality, inclusion, and professionalism in the Early Childhood Teaching Profession cannot be overemphasized. Wernersson (2015) has developed a helpful model to classify assumptions about male and female workers in any setting. These can be differentiated along two dimensions: femininity and masculinity as polarities, and gender hierarchy. On the polarity dimension, men and women can be understood as having similar or different qualities and abilities. . On the gender hierarchy dimension, men are more or less valued higher than women. To this, different assumptions were provided from the study and with focused interactions with the teachers about the roles both genders plays in Early Childhood Education, which are not significant. Collectively, we have a lot of work on our hands to achieve a gender-balanced early childhood education teaching profession. The developing issues around inclusion, gender representation, and gender appreciation in Early Childhood Education should be fundamental to our universal goal in the education sector. We must emphasized the importance of home and school working together which often demands that the children enjoyed the same gendered relationship at home and in school.

The result of the analysis of the respondents reveals that early childhood education male and female teachers have a similar perception of working in the early childhood education teaching profession. The perceptions shared, however, connect to (Smedley, 2007) claim that males in the early childhood teaching profession, exhibit the characteristics or attributes needed such as emotions, sensitivity, and creativity to be able to carry out their responsibilities in and around the classroom. Also, the study shows that there is a general acceptance of both genders playing active roles in Early Childhood Education as well as contributing immensely to its development. These findings support Brandes et al. (2015) who stated that men and women react differently in the way they perceive and react to children's play interests. Early childhood education professionals will benefit from both gender, will improve the workforce, promote diverse learning opportunities and contribute to the holistic development of the child through the collaborative effort of the male and female teachers.

The analysis of the respondents shows that we need to sensitize the fathers about the importance of their role in early childhood education and implement activities that include them in child care. The learning environment must be comfortable and welcoming so fathers can be able to engage fully, especially with the presence of male teachers which will enable more active participation. The findings from the unstructured interview with the fathers agree with Kahn (2005) who suggested that the presence of male educators could help fathers feel more relaxed in a predominantly female environment as they may perceive early years setting to be female-only spaces and find them quite intimidating. The idea that the increase in the acceptance and participation of more male teachers in the early childhood teaching profession has frequently been considered. There are even widely accepted researches and journals on the benefits of encouraging more male teachers in the early childhood setting for the development of a diverse workforce and balanced society. Fathers have been considered to likely play a significant role in the learning and development of children in early childhood as well as in the understanding of the concept of gender identity by modeling and imitating especially for boys. In 1993, the Childcare Network invited experts from various European Member States to Ravenna to take part in a debate on men as caregivers. The experts agreed that the measures to involve more men in the parenting of their young children would have little effect unless a greater number of male caregivers were employed in the childcare sector (EC CHILDCARE NETWORK, 1993).

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The study shows that children would benefit greatly from learning activities facilitated by both genders. They will also be open to gaining an understanding of gender roles and the importance of everyone working together, gender equality, and representation. Also, the male teacher will mostly serve as a role model and stable support system for the children, especially the boys. Male staff members could serve as role models for young fathers and, at the same time, services for young children could play an important part in the development of a new care culture for young children: a culture in which there is also a place for men. Most importantly, children will enjoy different dynamics and different styles of caring, playing, and instructing. (Rolfe, 2006; Jensen, 1996). However, parents especially mothers showed great concern about having male teachers around their children and stated that such men are potential perpetrators.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

One of the goals of Early Childhood Education is the overall development of children and the involvement of the effort of every stakeholder as well as caregiver regardless of their gender will yield a great outcome. During the early stage of a child's life, we must be very deliberate about the influences that our practices, policies, and strategies have on the growth, development, and learning experience of the children. Advocating and creating awareness with genuine facts and findings for a gender-balanced learning environment will be more beneficial to the child, parents, teachers, and administrators as proven in the study. This will also provide more learning opportunities for the children, improve the teaching delivery strategies of collaborative work among teachers, involved more stakeholders in the ECE sector, and encourage fathers' involvement in childcare.

Based on the findings from the study, it is concluded that developing and sustaining a gender-balanced early childhood teaching profession will be of great benefit to everyone. We can achieve a lot more in the early childhood learning environment if we encourage recruitment and acceptance of male teachers, and not enforcing that females are the best fit for the roles. Most of the benefits that this development will bring are not limited to promoting a gender-balanced workforce, offering diverse learning opportunities to the children, and having more fathers show interest in childcare.

However, the education workforce must challenge stereotypes and demonstrates gender equality for young children, and provides them with a more accurate reflection or example of the gender mix of their community. Schools should deliberately eliminate any form of bias or perceptions about having a gender-balanced teaching environment but should rather encourage teamwork that will bring a desired change in the life of the learners. The appropriate policy should be put in place. Training programmes, conferences, and school-to-school workshops will be organized by the researcher and other experts in the field of early childhood education to sensitize schools, educational recruiting firms, and institutions about the importance of developing and sustaining a gender-balanced early childhood teaching profession and how this will contribute to the different dynamics and styles of caring, playing, and instructing in the early childhood teaching environment.

Administrators and stakeholders in education are encouraged to sort out qualified male teachers who have an interest in working with the children (0-8 years old) and have them on board, offering a relaxing and accommodating working atmosphere. Access to diverse teachers in the early childhood teaching environment will provide and promote more learning opportunities and improve the quality of education. Schools should encourage more participation of fathers in academic and non-academic activities so they can be more involved, and the children will in turn gain and experience substantial support. One of the ways of achieving this is by having male teachers in the school environment as a member of the school community and growing consciousness in societies that fathers are important for their children's growth, development, and learning experience.

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