

## How Did 'He' Learn? The Male Pre-service Preschool Teachers' Experiences: Feminist Pedagogy Point of View

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### Abstract

When gender differences lead to an unbalanced structure in preschool education training classrooms, this cause a problem; traditional training courses for pre-service preschool teachers have resulted in their robustness to male learners. This article investigates the experiences of individuals who have studied preschool education in Taiwan. Three participants were interviewed, with a particular focus on their learning experience that adopted an in-depth interview method. The results found that males entering the realm of preschool education are often not considering becoming a preschool teacher. By failing to contribute to discussions, reacting dismissively to instruction, and pursuing outside specialties, the learning experience from a social perspective and gender stereotypes could aid them in getting better jobs.

**Keywords:** Feminist Pedagogy, Male Pre-service Preschool Teachers, Male Learning Experiences.

### 1.0 Introduction

Childhood is a key period for the development of gender roles, gender cognition and gender-typed behaviors (Chung, 2006). With the participation of males in preschool education, children have different subjects to observe and imitate. In this way, an environment free of gender discrimination can be created to promote male children's self-concepts (Chen & Sun, 2006; Harris & Barnes, 2009; Lin, 2006; Riley, Holmes, Cornwell & Blume, 1985; Seifert, 1986).

Preschool teachers in Taiwan were almost exclusively female before 1969. Then, until 2009, according to the Ministry of Education in Taiwan, male teacher is around 1.13%. Does the low percentage of male teachers in preschool influence those male learning and intention to serve as teachers in the future?

The Feminist Pedagogy emphasizes the concept of "liberation". Not just the liberation of females, the focus has also been extended to other subjects on the edge. And the right given to those subjects is also concerned. The Feminist Pedagogy was developed because of females being oppressed under the social structure in which females are the disadvantaged minority. When males are in the disadvantageous position as learners in the training of preschool teachers, do they have the same access of learning resources as females?

The participation of males in preschool education can not only help children with the learning and development in their early stages, but also provide them interactions which are different from the ones with female teachers (Farquhar, 1997; Harris, & Barnes, 2009). But almost all the males who have decided to study in the field of early childhood education are not respected. Sometimes they are even considered as weird by other people (Chang, 2005; Harris & Barnes, 2009; Liu, 2004; Russo & Feder, 2001; Wen, 2005; Wen, 2006). The Feminist Pedagogy puts emphasis on four issues including: knowledge construction, authority, voicing out, and positioning. It is a form of learning consciousness-raising, and also a social movement for the disadvantaged learners to voice out (Fisher, 2001).

The research by Russo and Feder (2001) shows that, the difference between males and females for taking teaching positions in the field of early childhood education is small. But there are fewer males choosing this major. Even those who had, often choose to be transferred to another department later.

In fact, the gender of teachers doesn't make difference in children's cognition. From the interviews with children, Harris and Barnes (2009) found that children's learning effectiveness is not influenced by the gender of teachers. Children's learning experiences differ with the gender of teachers. The result of the research by Wen (2005) indicates that parents and kindergarten supervisors wish that more males would join them. Would these pre-service preschool male teachers decide to take teaching positions in the field of early childhood education? According to their learning experience, would doing "jobs for women" take the

manhood off them? The answers can not be found in the previous researches. The researcher believed that, if the issues of pre-service preschool teachers' gender roles can not be clarified, then there wouldn't be a lot of males joining the field of early childhood education.

In the process of educating male preschool teachers, when "gender" is a factor that leads to an unbalanced course structure, is a traditional training class completes enough for male learners? Should they be taught using teaching methods appropriate for their educational backgrounds or should they silently accept the concept that "preschool teachers equal female teachers"?

Summarizing the descriptions above, although males taking positions in the field of early childhood education have been recognized, factors such as "social impression", "gender difference", and "feminine job" may still obstruct males' choices in occupation. Fisher (2001) defined Feminist Pedagogy as a social movement which allows the disadvantaged minority or subjects being oppressed to voice out. This study explores males' learning experience in the classroom with them being the minority. Therefore, the points of views on the self-conscious-raising of "Feminist Pedagogy" and the voicing out of the disadvantaged minority will be discussed below.

Belenky, Clinchy, Golderberg and Tarule (1986) said that teachers should help students become aware of their own strengths and raise their voices in order to change their lives. The pre-service male preschool teachers will raise their voices in training courses and seek the energy to empower their abilities.

## **2.0 Method**

### *2.1 Participants*

The participants were selected from the Department of Early Childhood Caring and Education. Three participants, *S1* (student 1) *S2* (student 2) and *S3* (student 3) were interviewed and observed after giving their informed consent. In order to avoid any trouble the participants may have faced during the semester as a result of participating in the study, the researcher did not publish the study until they had all graduated.

### *2.2 Data collection*

The data collected for this research include formal and informal interview content and observational notes. The analysis performed was content analysis. It was expected that the desired reliability would be obtained; therefore, the triangulation for the data source and for analyzers (researcher, another teacher, and the participants) from the triangulation method were performed to make adjustments. The researcher provided the data for analysis to another professor with a similar professional background for review of the analysis results and adjustments. Then, the participants confirmed the analysis results.

Before the interviews were conducted, the researcher explained the research motives and purposes to the participants. Every participant was interviewed two to four times, one to two hours per interview, according to the schedules of the researcher and the participants and according to the completeness of the data being collected.

### *2.3 Processing*

The interview data were analyzed using a thematic, qualitative approach. Initially, the learners' accounts were examined for key biographical data about important life events, transitions and social contexts. As described below, a re-examination of the data then went beyond the 'face value' of the narratives and endeavored to address closely the ways in which they were told or presented.

The interview recordings were transcribed verbatim. The formation of serial numbers was (code, number of interview, year, month, date); for example, (S12091212) stands for the second interview of S1 on 2009/12/12.

## **3.0 Results**

### *3.1 The males decide to study preschool education to open business*

Preschool teaching is generally considered to be women's work. Why would males choose to study in a childhood education department? *S1* had encountered the "preschool education department" since his vocational high school years. By the time the interview was conducted, *S1*'s learning experience had already been seven-years. This relatively long learning experience would not have happened if it was not for his mother, with whom he had a close, dependent relationship. A comment from his mother, "*you can make a lot of money out of it*", made him decide to transfer from mechanical engineering to "preschool education". Throughout, he felt that this transition was natural and right.

*...It was easy and pleasant. I thought, my future job would be playing with kids, and I would have time for a nap, that should be very nice. Then if I could become a principal,*

*I should be able to make a lot of money. So this is the right direction for me.  
(S11100423)*

Does subjective authority exist during the education process for males? This is the frustrating side of preschool teacher training.

*Since ancient times, males who pursue fame and honor and try to obtain a higher position are the ones being considered as with achievements. An elementary school teacher, a job like a nanny, cannot meet the society's expectation of males. (Chen, 2001, p132)*

The fact that an occupation, such as elementary school teacher, cannot meet the society's expectations of males implies that the conditions for this occupation are worse. Lortie (1975) claimed that the reasons that there are more female teachers than male ones are: 1) traditionally it is believed that teaching is the best job for women; 2) parents usually interfere with their sons' career choices more than with their daughters'. Generally, parents consider teaching as a job for women. Perhaps occupational gender-typing is very common in society. How can males holding early childhood care positions, which are seen as jobs for women, do so calmly?

*S1* was not willing to do jobs related to preschool. His reason was that if his salary was too low, others would "someone may laugh at him". I could not help wondering whether his job cognitions and interests are subjective or not.

In contrast to *S1*, who chose preschool education as his major because he wanted to open a business, *S2* and *S3* entered this department by recommendations. These two males had never thought about how to take care of children, how to design curricula for them or how to teach them. The only reason they entered this department was because passing the exams was easier than in other departments.

*I'd almost given up several times..... Some senior alumnus told me early childhood care is much easier. So I chose it. (S22100911)*

*Anyway, all I wanted was a bachelor's degree. Early childhood care seemed to be easy. A senior alumnus in our gym class said it'd be fine. (S31100911)*

In the learning process, the final destination these two male pre-service preschool teachers (who did not plan on becoming preschool teachers) had always wanted to reach was still the careers they had previously expected.

### **3.2 Male preschool teachers' learning experiences**

Especially in a classroom of preschool teacher training, with males being the minority, what are the differences between males' and females' feelings? This issue is beyond the scope of this study. However, the gap between the number of females and males is huge, and teacher trainers have designed their curriculums and chosen their teaching methods for females. They have not paid much attention to males' learning demands and prior knowledge construction. This is the difficulty male pre-service preschool teachers have to face in their learning experiences.

The research by Sadker and Sadker (1994) indicated that in classrooms with both males and females, university female students participate less often in discussions than elementary school and junior high school female students. Further, the frequency of teachers' interactions with students differs by gender. Generally, male students are more favored because teachers have higher expectations of male students than female ones (Chang & Chen, 1997; Pan, 1998). In other words, school education, especially university education, is better for male students' development. But is it the same in a preschool education classroom? According to the interviews with the participants, most preschool teachers are female. Therefore, when instructors design curricula, they rarely consider the differences between males and females.

"Teaching aids making" is an ability almost all pre-service preschool teachers have to acquire. However, the types of teaching aids and the proceedings of training courses seem to be part of the causes of unhappy learning experiences.

*..... So, this kind of course (courses related to teaching aids making), unless obligatory, I wouldn't take them. But there were still some teachers telling us this was very important. If we couldn't do that well, then we need to improve our basic abilities. .... Once I told my teacher that I don't want to be a kindergarten teacher any more. And I was lectured for quite some time. Funny, I was going to be a gym teacher, why did I have to learn that?  
(S22100911)*

*As long as the assignment was about making teaching aids, I asked my classmates to give*

*me a hand. I couldn't get a scholarship anyway. I just need an OK score to get the credit of this course. (S31100911)*

"Males cannot make teaching aids attentively" might be another gender-stereotyped belief. But traditional teaching methods make teachers occupy a role of authority with regard to knowledge in the learning process and students are the silent knowledge receivers. A classroom should be a "liberating environment" where both teachers and students can participate and where everyone is a subject, not merely an object (Gore, 1992; Shrewsbury, 1987). Therefore, unlike the traditional image, teachers are no longer the only owners and providers of knowledge. As Freire (1993) said, the ideal is more like student-teacher and teacher-student collaborations to complete communication and knowledge construction.

So, teacher trainers should respect the differences between students in order for the minority in the classroom to feel respected. The ideal of Feminist Pedagogy, which is based on caring, includes not only the traditional course design with a female touch, but also the proper design of courses that can encourage male learners to show their specialties, giving the disadvantaged minority a chance to express their voices and to be respected. Teacher trainers should pay more attention to the disadvantaged learners, in this case males, to find out if they feel oppressed and not able to speak out their confusions.

"Teaching aid making" is the most frustrating course for male students. Does that mean teacher trainers should have a different interpretation of the meaning of "teaching aids"? They should give considerations to not only the circumspect quality of females, but also other male or female students who cannot fit in. Especially when male students hold the attitude of "it's fine as long as I don't fail this subject" and are not willing to (or cannot) express their own feelings, the minority in the classroom may become the group of learners being repressed.

### 3.3 Gender difference of impression

"Males should be masculine and females should be feminine". This kind of belief is deeply rooted in every level of society (Chen, 2001). Males are supposed to be good at science and engineering, subjects that are masculine, whereas tender jobs like teaching children are supposed to be the responsibility of females. In a teaching environment, the image of males is similar to the traditional belief of "strong" males.

*..... It's fine as long as the male students can show up in the classroom. They are supposed to become presidents of enterprises. Learning how to run a business is more important. (T1110724)(The first teacher who was teaching in the Department of Early Childhood Caring and Education)*

Indeed, a male student is paid more attention to by teachers. However this attention is not toward whether *he* has acquired adequate professional knowledge but toward *his* future direction of occupation. In fact, it is not just the teachers, but male students themselves, who have preconception of the genders. In this way they limit themselves from becoming preschool teachers. Besides "low salary" and "being laughed at", they also think that males are too careless to become preschool teachers.

*..... A teacher needs to be not only responsible, but also patient. I think girls are attentive by nature. That's why they are meant to be working in this field. My personal opinion is that most males are careless or impatient. (S12100902)*

S1 considered "most males are careless or impatient" as a reason why he could not be a preschool teacher in the future. If males do jobs that require attentiveness, they are like women. In the male learning experience, this kind of impression can be found in almost every learner. "Being attentive" has been defined as being feminine by males. The participants used this as an excuse not to become preschool teachers.

### 3.4 Lack of role models

The percentage of male preschool teachers is very low. When male pre-service preschool teachers enter the field to practice, it is hard to find an example to learn from. Male preschool teachers are usually foreign teachers (English teachers) or gym teachers. How to guide a class? How to communicate with parents and colleagues? Male learners usually have to find these answers on their own or let females take the lead.

*..... I really don't know how to teach him. He doesn't know how to tie up a girl's hair. We must help the girls tie up their hairs before they leave school, so that the parents who come to pick them up would find them clean. It's weird for males to do things like that (tying up girls' hairs). He can't do it, so I have to ask him (S1) to clean up the toilets. (T21100922)(The second teacher who was teaching in the kindergarten)*

"Cleaning toilets" became S1's practice. "Not being able to tie up hair" became his sin.

*..... It's fine with me. It's easy for me. Otherwise I'd be very busy before kids leave school.  
Some of the parents are troublesome. (S13100923)*

Male students can get away with the toils and trifles before children go home. In this way, they lose the chance to interact with parents and to participate in the process of kids going to/leaving school. In a learning environment, every student's thoughts and opinions are valued. The role a teacher plays is similar to that of a midwife, to help students give birth to what they have inside them (Tisdell, 1995). The purpose of "tying up hair" may be simply to give parents a good feeling about their children. However, would not casting a male student aside, depriving him of the experiences and his values, denying the possibility of his development turn the care and love for him into the obstruction in his learning? Making sure *he* is not neglected and becomes silent should be an important goal of teaching.

*There are so many girls. I think there should be male teachers in kindergartens. So there can be integration... I don't know how to say it. There are different ways of expressions between males and females. I believe an environment with both males and females is better. (S13100923)*

### 3.5 Social conception

For male pre-service preschool teachers, social conception is something to be overcome from time to time during learning experiences. Society is used to categorizing people into males and females with a confronting dualistic way of thinking. Crossing the preconceived gender line results in a bad social concept. This fact usually makes the person involved feel a lot of pressure. Because males and females play different roles in society, with some traditionally conceptualized jobs only performed by a certain gender, results in the development of gender norms. The related role techniques and beliefs are also stereotyped (Deaux, Dane & Wrightsman, 1993; translated by Yang, 1999). Therefore, in a social context, especially with most of preschool teachers being female, a gender norm has developed: whoever takes this job is thought of as feminine.

*In beginning, I dared not tell any of my classmates (junior high school) about it. But I had to. Well, it wasn't very bad. They just thought that I am weird. I usually told them that it's just an easy way to the degree. (S32101215)*

*..... I am not going to be a preschool teacher, why should I care about what they say? I want to be a boss. I have plans. I am a recommended student for admission in Gym.  
Nobody would think of me as a pussy. (S23101227)*

The social conception makes male pre-service preschool teachers want to escape from reality. Even if a male wants to study in this field, factors such as "low salary" and "being laughed at" may change his perspective.

In the learning of male pre-service preschool teachers, subjective judgment is dominated by outside objects. Other people's opinions dominate the feelings and energy at the beginning of their learning. Although the three participants did not clearly point out the reason why being in the department of preschool education is a bad thing, the thought that "other people may laugh at me" hints at these males' feelings. Thus, in the process of learning, they try to look for business opportunities simply because "teaching kids" is not a job for "real men" (Allan, 1993). With this kind of confronting dualistic logic, male students' subjective cognition depends not only on the efforts of the males themselves, but also the teacher trainers' thought deconstructions.

### 3.6 Finding a new world

In a classroom with females as the majority, males may have conflicts of subjective cognition such as doubt among colleagues, social conception, and doing a woman's job. Even so, the three participants had experienced different job distinctions in the learning experience of early childhood care.

*SI* thought that as he had spent seven years in the department of preschool education, if he could not be recognized in that field, the seven years would be wasted. Learning another specialty was his way of integrating early childhood care with business.

*..... I was lucky to be able to learn magic as my second specialty..... However, if I can teach magic in a kindergarten or an after-school program, my income would be stable. Some musicians may be very good (in skills), but they don't know how to make children happy..... I've learn a lot about it in the department of preschool education. This is where, I can put it into practice. All I need is children's attention and my magic would be amazing*

*in their eyes..... I mean, after spending so many years in the field of early childhood care, if I don't end up doing a related job, it'd be a waste. (S13100923)*

S1 wished to open an opportunity for himself with the integration of “magic”. After attending the university programs, he had planned, formed a magic team and had his own talent class in a kindergarten. Before he graduated with a master degree, his dream of “making a lot of money” came true.

*I am paid well. After I finish my service in the army, I will make better plans. (S13100923)*

During their practice periods, S2 and S3 found that kindergartens are in need of gym teachers. What these two male pre-service preschool teachers had been planning was to design a class that can follow this trend.

*In the beginning, the classes bored me. Now I am very concentrated in classes such as gym, course design, game design, etc. (S32101215)*

*..... Many kindergartens hire male teachers to teach gym. But those teachers don't understand kids. We do. In fact, principles like us better..... It was like that in the kindergarten where I practiced. (S23101227)*

If the learning result were more than just a “job for women”, male pre-service preschool teachers may be able to overcome the social conception and turn their attitude from negative to positive.

Does gender bias influence what teacher trainers care about or dislike during their teaching processes? When males are being trained, they may be oppressed because of trainers' judgments. It is important to construct a safe environment to encourage introspective discussions in classrooms (Chung, 2001; Thompson & Gitlin, 1995).

In this kind of environment, participants relate to each other. Every student's opinions, ideas and emotions matter. Through an environment like this, which makes participant feel secure, they may speak out and empower their abilities. Like Lewis and Simon said, it is important to include “reflexive turn” in an open pedagogy (Chung, 2001; Thompson & Gitlin, 1995). Applying “reflexive turn” in a preschool teacher training course means destroying the historical female subject and producing knowledge with a male subject. In other words, male characteristics in training courses of preschool teachers should be “seen” instead of hidden; hiding them leads male students to become silent and not able to learn and to introspect as they should.

#### **4.0 Discussion**

From the perspective of teacher trainers, this study explores how males in the preschool teacher training courses construct their self-knowledge and raise their consciousness in classrooms, where they belong to the minority. As the research results show, under the traditional social conception, it is difficult for male learners to surpass stereotyped gender images.

On the other hand, it is difficult for trainers to discard the thought that females are leading preschool education. The difficulties males' encounter, especially during course teaching, are no longer the problems of learning itself, but the possible social conceptions and learning trends of a different gender. Teacher trainers must introspect; otherwise males will rarely be seen in preschool education.

In fact, the gender of teachers does not make a difference in children's cognition. From interviews with children, Harris and Barnes (2009) found that children's learning effectiveness is not influenced by the gender of teachers. However, this result is different from the findings of domestic researches from Taiwan (Wu, 2000; Chung, 2006) that children's learning experiences differ with the gender of teachers. ON the other hand, the results of a study by Wen (2005) indicate that Taiwan's parents and kindergarten supervisors wish that more males would join them.

Interestingly, Chen (2001), Wen (2005), and Wen (2006), mentioned that their majors were all related to preschool education, and because of being doubted by others while they were students, they had decided to do research on male preschool teachers. However, there are no further explanations in their studies of whether their occupation cognitions had been influenced by the concepts of traditional gender roles. Would these male pre-service preschool teachers decide to take teaching positions in the field of preschool education if the research results are positive? According to their learning experience, traditional gender role, would doing “jobs for women” take the manhood off them? The answers cannot be found in previous studies. The present researcher believes that if the issues of pre-service preschool teachers' gender roles are clarified, there will not be many males joining the field of preschool education.

In summary, although males taking positions in the field of preschool education have been recognized,

factors such as “*social impression*”, “*gender difference*”, and “*feminine job*” may still obstruct males’ occupational choices.

### **5.0 Conclusions**

The purpose of this study was to explore male pre-service preschool teachers’ learning experiences and the reasons for their choosing to join the field. Males entered the field to open a business and to be successful. As for their learning experiences, they had to adjust their attitude to non-subject consciousness such as social conception and gender images. By combining what they had learned with creating a business, they were able to write a new chapter that has nothing to do with “jobs for women”.

#### *5.1 Do great things*

Preschool teachers are not paid well. They cannot afford to raise their own children. Therefore this kind of “job for women” makes men choose other occupations. *S1* believed that he could be a principle and make a lot of money by choosing preschool education as his major. In other words, the primary reason for *S1* to choose this field was his future career. After realizing the capital required for a kindergarten and the fact that not everyone can be a principle, he started to feel confused about his future in this field. Eventually, he developed his second specialty, magic, and combined it with early childhood care, ending his seven year education well.

*S2* and *S3* did not choose this major to become principles. They felt that this choice was an under table major for females. Their attitude included “*being low-keyed*” (they did not want other people to know about their major) and “*being dismissive*” (they thought of it as an easy way to get a degree). All they wanted was a degree. But all three participants, during their learning process, had linked up early preschool education with their career and their attitudes had been changed to being positive about learning skills for their future. In summary, the reasons why male pre-service preschool teachers had chosen to study preschool education did not include “interest”. According to Wang (1996), Chang (2003), and Farquhar (1997), males have to live with the traditional gender image, which stops them from joining preschool education. Doing “*jobs for women*” is unacceptable in society for men. Further, they cannot help considering the (financial) success of their careers and degrees.

#### *5.2 Learning experience*

Males choosing to be preschool teachers are quite few. The situation is similar in countries of different conditions (Harris, & Barnes, 2009; Ministry of Education, 2009; Russo & Feder, 2001). Males’ learning experiences are different from females’ due to the social conception and gender stereotypes. They gradually develop their own learning experiences from the career options.

### **6.0 Suggestions**

Capobianco (2007) believed the scientific instructors obtain more liberation of teaching methods from self-releasing the knowledge construction, that is, from a feminist pedagogy point of view; self-growth has been promoted. It shows that in addition to respecting the individual differences of students and lead out the characteristics of students, teachers who have learned self-liberation can understand more deeply the learning difficulties of learners. And then teachers can guide the knowledge construction of students by course design and teaching guidance. Therefore, this study suggests teacher trainers to practice the following methods to guide male learners to enjoy learning in the classroom and put what they’ve learned into practice:

#### *6.1 To assist the male learners “positioning”*

If male learners position “the field of early childhood education” as “jobs for women”, they would escape from the “female department”. If male learners can establish a different “position” through the guidance of teacher trainers, and see gender difference as the inevitable outcome. It can help males to transform from the disadvantaged learners to the same status as female learns in early childhood education.

#### *6.2 Opening up a secured conversation environment in the classroom*

When male learners have the courage to express their opinions in the classroom, teachers have to respect and tolerate them to form a secured learning environment from the conversations between teachers and students and between students. In other words, teachers’ tolerating and respecting the differences in the classroom give male learners more courage to voice out.

If males in the learning process keep on learning with “male authority” in mind, they cannot be recognized by peers. For example, the concepts such as “early childhood care is very easy to study” or “This is a woman’s job.” are not helpful for self-learning, or even cause more obstacles. Therefore, when males

decide to study the field of early childhood education, the thought of “male authority” has to put aside, and they have to study with female students together, in order to see that “I can be different”. Male learners can obtain better results through different studying experiences, as a magician or a gym teacher.

The research subjects of this study include three pre-service preschool male teachers. Similar cases can be analyzed by analogy, but it cannot be inferred to others. Of course, if the subjects’ families and classmates can be studied to explore the deeper learning experience, it can be used for future reference. In addition, this study was analyzed from the Feminist Pedagogy’s point of view, and the reasons and experiences are all from subjects’ own description. In future studies, it is suggested that more researches can be done according to theories such as “objective orientation” or “learners’ intrinsic and extrinsic motivations”. The result might be different.

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