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A Grassroots Support Group for Male Early Childhood Educators: Implications for Practice

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Abstract

This study explores the effects of a support model for male workers developed in Israel based on grassroots activities of male ECE students and practitioners. The extreme isolation of male childcare workers has been well documented. As a small minority in their work setting, these men are placed in the role of "the other" (Perez, 2009). Connell (1995) has noted that men construct their masculinity primarily according to reactions of other men. Male support groups have been found effective among men in female professions, as they bolster the emotional wellbeing of these men (Blom et al., 2011; Calasanti/King, 2007).

This study examines the effect of a support forum for male ECE students and workers on the professional self-identity of group members. The forum meets bimonthly to provide a collegial atmosphere of mutual discourse and collaborative professional growth. Open interviews were conducted with five men characterized by different student and professional profiles. Results were analyzed using grounded theory to identify major themes. The teachers voluntarily participated in this study and granted permission for their interviews to be used anonymously in the published results.

Findings show that participation in the group served to break isolation, improve self-image, and enhance the professional identity of those interviewed. Furthermore, group participation enabled men to deal effectively with the sense of "otherness" through the awareness of mutual support beyond the forum meetings. These findings suggest that grassroots support groups may significantly bolster professional self-identity of male workers and encourage their retention in the ECE workforce.

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Keywords

male workers, professionalization, self-identity, support groups, gender

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The Beginning

Boaz's explanation

At one of my classes at the college I was asked by the teacher to draw something that is unknown about me. This was my picture: A kindergarten classroom with me and the tables, chairs, games and books but with no children.

This picture described my fears of becoming an early childhood teacher. I was concerned that parents would not send their children to my kindergarten because I'm a man.

And so it all began.

The forum

Grass- roots organization of men in ECEC in Israel

- Initiated by male students and their college advisor in a college of education
- Began with four students and now has 40 names on a mailing list.
- Has met five times over a two year period with 5-20 men in attendance.
- Meetings include a research- based lecture, opportunities for the men to tell their stories, focused discussions on action projects, and informal chat

Projects:

- Expanding the forum to reach out to all men who work with young children in Israel.
- Meeting with the Head of the Preschool Division at the Ministry of Education (MOE)
- Presentation at the conference for State Preschool Inspectors about the experience of men in ECEC
- Planned formation of a national steering committee on men in ECEC through the MOE
- Creation of guidelines for physical contact with children

Research question

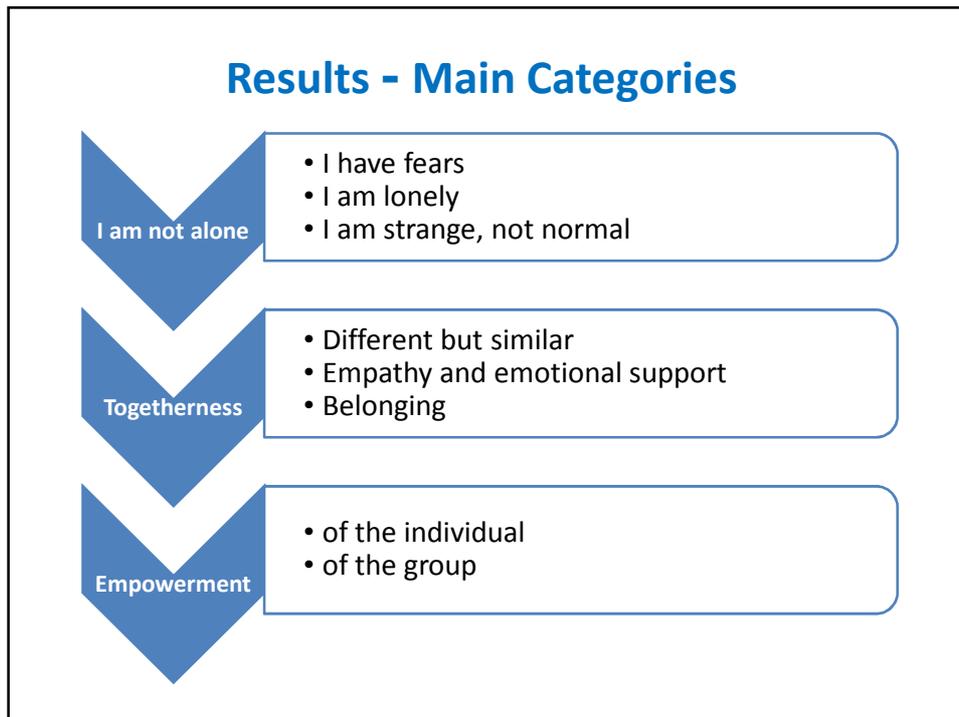
What was the significance of the forum for its participants?

Research Methods

Four participants in the forum were interviewed:

- **Yoav:** a third year student in an ECEC undergraduate degree program
- **Boaz:** a recent college graduate with a B.Ed. in ECEC, in his first full time placement as a head teacher of 3-4 year olds
- **Haim:** a full time teacher of 2-4 year olds in a private preschool with 8 years experience, and a children's book author
- **Gadi:** a veteran teacher of 30 years in a kibbutz kindergarten

The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and coded for themes using grounded theory.



I am not alone

The experience of being alone

I have fears: “You have fears, you are alone and suddenly you meet with other people who also have fears and you're talking about it and you hear that you are not alone” (Boaz)

I am lonely: “I imagined a picture in mind that each one of all of these people was with himself and was sure he was alone and has no one to talk to .. and suddenly you discover not. There are more like you.” (Yoav)

I am strange, not normal : “You always feel a bit like an outsider or alien, and suddenly you get a message from your own planet saying : ‘There is a meeting of all the aliens’. What fun. A stranger wouldn’t understand it.” (Haim)

Togetherhness

Different but similar

“ I collected all sorts of things from what people said and I said Wow, there's such a mosaic of people... Eyes sparkle. There are all united and are not afraid to say they want to work in early childhood.” (Gadi)

“ One of the most exciting things about it was meeting Israeli men, and see the range of characters: religious educators, Orthodox men, and settlers, and others who are secular from Tel-Aviv, leftist, and from all walks of life. And we all came because of our passion for education, through action, wanting to share, perhaps to become more professional and feel part of a group. I think it is very very important.” (Haim)

Empathy and emotional support :

“ [The forum] created that strength. We are people who are not aggressive. We are not looking for power, we are looking to express our voices nicely, listening with support .. It's something I feel very, very soft: Let's sit. Let's talk. Let's listen to each other”. “It brings you some kind of peace, tranquility, faith.” (Boaz)

“ I felt love and acceptance, and I had such fun.” (Haim)

Belonging :

“ I am looking for a lot of belonging. I belong to a group of these women and I am one of them ... Belonging to a group - that is very important.” (Gadi)

Empowerment

of the individual :

“ My ability to embrace and kiss children is very natural to me, but again I guess conversations with the others gave me strength. Mainly about giving the child a kiss on the forehead.”
(Boaz)

of the group :

“ We started as a one man, and then there were three, four and suddenly we became 30. You feel this tremendous power, multiplying yourself one hundred percent, far more than a hundred percent.” (Yoav)

Four stories

Yoav

“Trying to pull your dream like a kite through the world”

- Yoav seeks camaraderie and emotional support.
- His extreme isolation as the only man among 60 women students placed him in a position of loneliness.
- Through the togetherness of the forum he found empathy and friendship.
- The quick growth of the forum engendered “unleashed power”, and enabled him to survive the academic program despite his gendered isolation.
- He expects the forum to produce results and is frustrated about its disorganization .

Boaz

“It’s like a flood, the tension which accompanies the first rain of the season. It becomes a flowing river that rages, and there’s nothing to stop it.”

- Boaz views his career in parallel to the development of the forum. As the forum flourishes, so does his work as an ECEC worker.
- He initiated the forum out of extreme fear that no one would want to send children to his kindergarten.
- The togetherness is a central theme as indicated by the variety of men who attend.
- Power is crucial to Boaz, and he sees his own empowerment as a reflection of the power of the group .
- He expects the forum to grow to a national level, influence state policies, and have an effect internationally.

Haim

“I started off with butterflies in my stomach and I came out feeling wonderful, it was truly a joyous occasion“.

- As a homosexual, he feels complete acceptance by the group.
- He feels that the forum has the potential to contribute to the wellbeing of weak elements of the Israeli population, including battered women and their children, by presenting a different and healthier view of the caring male .
- He would like to see the forum offer support to men studying ECEC, to share the expertise of its members with young students.

Gadi

“It should connect more links in the chain.“

- For Gadi, the Forum is an opportunity as an experienced teacher to be with men who share their enthusiasm for working with young children. The group provides a safe place for him and the others to talk about their experiences as men in the kindergarten.
- His loneliness included having no significant professional reference group with which he could identify during his 30 years as a kindergarten teacher.
- The forum suddenly brought together male ECEC teachers from many different backgrounds and types of work. He connected with all of them. “I’m no longer different” .
- He does not emphasize empowerment, because he is coming from a position of strength in his profession and his community .
- He expects the forum to achieve national recognition.

Frustrations

- Inconsistency of participation
- Lack of clear goals
- The focus on action goals led to an attenuation of the intimacy of the group.

Conclusion

The forum promoted an empowering process

**from the stage of loneliness ,
to the experience of togetherness ,
to a sense of agency and power.**

Recommendations

Strengthen the awareness and sensitivity of teachers, supervisors, and other stakeholders to the loneliness and fears of men working in ECEC.

Recognize the importance of peer groups to nurture and support early childhood male teachers throughout their career.

Thank you for your attention!

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