

Male teachers and children's gender construction in Preschool Education*

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Introduction

Early childhood education (ECE) remains one of the most gender-skewed occupations in many Western countries. The rates range from 1% - 4% in most countries (Sumsion, 2005) and 8% in countries such as Denmark and Spain (Jensen, 1996; Sumsion, 2005). These percentages indicate that the relation between the above profession and gender is strongly structured.

In the international literature the issue of male teachers in ECE has been discussed from many points of view (Cameron, 2001; Sumsion, 2005); because of the few empirical investigations the issue is still open in several countries and in particular in Greece, where research is lacking.

The key issues highlighted in the international literature are:

(A) The impact of male workers / teachers on young children development (Gold & Reis, 1982) and gender construction (Cameron, 2001; MacNaughton & Newman, 2001; Sumsion, 2001, 2005).

(B) The importance of male teachers entry in early childhood work as affecting the equality / balance in staff (Cameron, 2001).

(C) The relation between men and professionalism (Murray, 1996; Jensen, 1998) and in particular between men in non-traditional occupations and women's work. Studies have shown that the career paths of men and women differ along gender lines as male teachers are likely to benefit from higher wages and better opportunities (e.g. senior positions) than their female counterparts (Kauppinen et al. 1989; Williams, 1995; Cameron, 2001).

(D) The gendering of men working in ECE (Sargent, 2005).

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The training of kindergarten teachers in ECE in Greece

Cross-national comparisons of the early childhood services and education are complex because there are many differences between countries with respect to the training of teachers and with respect to the national policy of care and education for young children (Cameron, 2001).

In Greece, the prospective teacher in ECE has to pass entrance examinations at the University level by the Department of Preschool Education (an eight semester course). The university degree enables one to work, after passing a special pedagogical national examination, mainly in public kindergartens, attended by children 4-6 years old and administered by the Ministry of Education. Also, a kindergarten teacher could work in public or private child care centres, attended by children 2-6 years old or 3 months to 6 years old and administered by the Ministry of Welfare.

Since 1983, men have the right for the first time to study at University Departments of Preschool Education, and to work in public or private kindergartens and in child care centres. During these twenty-seven years there has been no official education policy by the Ministry encouraging men to pursue the profession of kindergarten teacher and to work in public kindergartens.

Our research is focused on male teachers working in public kindergartens which are administered by the Ministry of Education. According to the latest statistical data of the National Statistical Service (2008), in Greece, in a total of 12,591 teachers working in public kindergartens only 122 teachers are men, i.e., about 1%.

Public kindergartens operate primarily as a full-day school (from 8:00 until 16:00), having only kindergarten teachers as staff (excluding support staff). The kindergarten curriculum is determined centrally by the Ministry of Education and the Pedagogical Institute (a scientific institution of the Ministry). From 2006, Early Childhood Education is mandatory for children from 5-6

years (i.e., only for one year); however, infrastructure, working conditions and teacher salaries have not improved. It is to be noted that teachers of all levels (from kindergarten to high school) in Greece, men and women alike, receive the same (low) salary.

Male kindergarten teachers and children's gender construction: Theoretical assumptions and research questions

Our research is based on the following theoretical assumptions:

- (a) Gender is socially constructed (Alloway, 1995; Thorne, 1993).
- (b) Gender stereotypes at the age of preschool children are under negotiation (Davies, 1989; McMurray, 1998).

In this context, I will attempt to answer two key research questions:

- (A) Do the male teachers of our research, to the extent that they choose a non-stereotypical 'male' profession, contribute to change and / or subversion of social stereotypes regarding the construction of children's gender, and through which pedagogical practices do they affect it?
- (B) Are they a traditional or an alternative male role model for children (parents and female colleagues)?

Methodology

To answer these two questions we conducted semi-structured and 'in depth' interviews with ten male teachers working in public kindergartens in the island of Crete. According to the current statistics, in a total of 1020 teachers in public kindergartens in Crete, men are just 10, i.e., about 1%.

The interviews, which last about two hours each, have been recorded, and transcribed. They embark on such questions as: Did you like to become a kindergarten teacher? What were your first experiences, in the kindergarten, with parents, female teachers and children? How do you perceive of your social position, having a profession regarded as predominantly female? How do you work in the kindergarten with children? Do you feel that you affect the

construction of children's gender and what teaching practices do you employ? etc.

The first research question (A, above) is answered by the interviewees directly while the second research question (B, above) is answered indirectly through questions like: How do children perceive your presence in the classroom? Do children distinguish you from the female teacher? Which role do parents attribute to you? Etc. The analysis of the interviews is based on 'grounded theory': responses and narratives of male teachers are coded, and some basic analytical categories are extracted and discussed.

The profile of male teachers of our research

The emerging profile of the ten male teachers that participated in our research is as follows:

- They are 30-45 years old.
- Nobody had, in national exams, pre-school education as his first choice. Two of them had it as second choice.
- Two have Masters and are PhD candidates; one is interested in starting postgraduate studies. One of them would like to change his career.
- Four of them are married and have children.
- Four of them are working in kindergartens located in big towns and the rest of them work in villages and small towns.
- They have been working for two to fifteen years in kindergarten.
- All, except one, work in all-day kindergartens in collaboration with female teachers.
- Two of them employ in their everyday practice systematically drama play, while two of them employ music.
- All of them like their job.
- All of them perceive themselves as different from female teachers.
- They believe that they are less knowledge-centred and less loyal to the school curriculum.
- They consider themselves more flexible during the daily program, calm in the classroom and less competitive compared with female teachers.
- They say they have very good relationships with children and parents.

Discussion

As revealed by the analysis of the interviews, male teachers argue that their presence in the kindergarten creates a balance both among teachers and among children in daily life (Cameron, 2001: 437). This balance contributes to the construction of children's gender in a direct / active and experiential way, through teaching practices that they use, or indirectly, by exposing children to different *versions of masculinity*. Those versions of masculinity, which will be analyzed below, indicate how the male teachers of our research *position themselves* in kindergarten and how they perceive the ways in which they are positioned by others. The answers and narratives indicate how these male kindergarten teachers perceive their role and how they affect children's gender construction.

(A) Male teacher as a flexible and non-interventionist model teacher / advocate of equal opportunities to children

The basic research question, i.e., whether the male teachers of our research affect children's gender construction and how they manage it in the classroom, has been answered positively by all male teachers of our research, but they claimed that it isn't their aim to overthrow / change the gender social stereotypes. Instead, they presented themselves as supporters of equal educational opportunities to all children regardless of gender.

"I didn't change the use of the classroom space. All children use the area jointly. Boys and girls come and go in the dollhouse ... We have a small stroller with a doll that boys use it ... The girls also play in the garage and the building materials ... We [adults] are creating the stereotypes. Let the children play as they wish."(George).

"I don't encourage children to change genders stereotypes because they don't need it ... On the other hand, I don't enforce sexist stereotypes ... I give equal opportunities to boys and girls ... All children are involved in 'boyish' and 'girlish' toys ..." (Bill).

As many researchers have suggested, all children will benefit from participation of male teachers in ECE *if* these teachers are able to help

counter children's sex stereotyped views about gender (MacNaughton & Newman, 2001; Sumsion, 2005).

(B) Male teacher as 'father model'

Almost all teachers of our research say that the male teacher in early education covers an emotional void in children's lives as a result of the absence of fathers at home, either because of a divorce or because of long working hours.

"There are many single parent families and children need a male presence, but a strong presence that would fill the void of their father ..." (Nick).

"Parents thought that because I was a man I would fill up a void ... They trusted me, especially during the break ... They thought that I would take good care of them! The kids grew up mainly with their mother and, so, I was a good model of father ... Sometimes the girls call me Daddy ... " (Tommy).

The argument about father's absence is very common in literature dealing with the issue of men working in ECE (Jensen, 1996; Cameron, 2001). Male teacher as the 'absent father' could provide positive male figures, particularly for boys, as they induct boys to masculinity; But, it is not clear how male teachers would compensate for absent fathers, as 'fatherhood' appears to depend upon many variables, such as personal factors, socio-economic factors, cultural and family structure (Williams, 1998).

(C) Male teacher as a model of traditional man

A central issue for men working in ECE is the expectation that they will act as a 'traditional' male role model. Three forms of traditional male role model have emerged from participant interviewees: A male teacher 'for men jobs'; a special 'children relationship's regulator' / a 'disciplinarian'; an authority figure / a 'power man'.

(C.1.) Male teacher 'for men's jobs'

Several male teachers claimed that, either spontaneously or not, they are involved in daily life in kindergarten beyond their teaching duties, which are stereotypically 'male' (see also, Sargent, 2005).

"We do all the traditional men's jobs: nail, mend, fix fountains, correct damages ..." (George)

"The female teachers in our school are happy with us ... A man for all jobs! We are the best carriers and reconditioners of furniture in the classroom ..." (John).

(C.2). Male teacher as a 'regulator' / a 'disciplinarian':

The male teachers of our research say that according to their understanding of parents' expectations, what is missing in the kindergarten is someone who displays stereotypically masculine behaviours and attributes. For example, the presence of a male teacher in the classroom and in the schoolyard contributes to an increase in discipline and to a decrease in the frequency of behavioural problems (see also, Sargent, 2005: 255).

"We regulate more easily the relationship among children ... and parents trust us; children listen ... It seems that men as regulators are more acceptable by all: female teachers, parents and children ..." (Jim)

(C.3). Male teacher as an authority figure / a 'power man'

It is the most stereotypical / traditional version of the male kindergarten teacher.

"I am regarded as the standard model of power and authority ... that I have the first place ... A child said once to a female colleague: "Miss, mister Bill is commanding over here, because he is man!" ... As man [...] more easily among parents ... The parents respect me ... Even the female teachers choose the difficult issues to be handled by myself. » (Bill)

"Parents trust me ... They give weight to my opinion ... I am expected to deal with the difficult

relationships ... The children are listening. No need to yell a lot. Because I am a man children were afraid a little ... "(Tommy)

It is clear, that children, female teachers and parents don't seem to see male teachers as non-traditional male, despite their non-traditional career choice. The above narratives indicate that male teachers don't change the stereotypical men's representations.

(D) Male teacher as an alternative model of man

At the same time, children are exposed to 'alternative male' roles with which they are less familiar. In Greece, as there is not a support staff in all-day kindergartens, male teachers occupy themselves with non-traditional jobs.

"Children see us exposed in many roles, and often roles that are different from those they are accustomed to. We must set the bed, fold the sheets, warm food and serve it ... "(Michael)

As many researchers claim, exposing children to alternative, non-traditional constructions of masculinity challenges children's traditional and limiting understandings of gender. Especially, male teachers who actively challenge traditional gender power structures are likely to challenge children's traditional constructions of gender (MacNaughton & Newman, 2001; Sumsion, 2005).

(E) Male teacher as an alternative profession model

One of the interesting findings of this research is a potential change in the 'careers' of young children. The choice of profession of kindergarten teachers for the young boys, even if not matched, give them a new identity which, in theory, negates stereotypical choices of a 'future profession' for the children.

"When I asked children to say what profession they want to do, Argyris, at first, said that he wants to become a builder and build houses ... but, then he said, he preferred to be a teacher, like Mr. Bill and to work with children ..." (Bill)

"Kids often say that when they grow up they want to be like Mr. Alex. And this impresses me a lot. Perhaps they are not aware of the separation between kindergarten teacher and elementary school teacher, but a male teacher in the kindergarten is a 'cool' picture. Thus I understand them when they say 'I want to be like Mr. Alex'". (Alex)

Conclusions

Male kindergarten teachers, even though they claim to manage in sensitive ways issues related to the construction of children's gender by supporting equal and non-interventional educational opportunities, though not explicitly stated, they 'enjoy' stereotypical / traditional male roles. Children, parents and female teachers don't see men as non-traditional male, despite their non-traditional career choice (see also Sumsion, 2005). At the same time, children are exposed to alternative 'male' roles, perhaps for the first time in their lives. Although this is important, MacNaughton & Newman (2001:151) suggest «we need to do more than model different forms of masculinity for children to create any change in how they form and reform themselves as gender beings".

The entry of male teachers in ECE, crucial as it is, answers and possibly resolves some problems in early childhood education but in fact it leaves several issues open for further investigation. The methods are often inadequate, the need for case studies and long-term participant observation and the combinatorial methods of macro- and micro approaches may in future give some guidance in understanding some of them. Integrating also all these different interpretations into the broader socio-cultural context where gender stereotypes are constructed is necessary.

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