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Personal and Societal Factors in Men's Choosing and Remaining in an Early Childhood Career: an International Perspective

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Abstract

The presented study aims at identifying both personal factors enabling men to challenge cultural norms by choosing to teach young children, and cultural hurdles concomitant with this decision. The research also explores determinates of retention and longevity of men in the ECE workforce. Previous studies describing men's trajectories in ECE (King, 1998; Watson & Woods, 2011) are largely non-analytical and limited to the American context (Nelson & Sheppard, 2005), focusing on lower elementary grades (Sargeant, 2001) to the exclusion of preschool settings. Gender construction theory (Connell, 1995) sheds light on decisions to enter the field, suggesting that gender identity is not only shaped by employment choices but also determines them. Deterance from remaining in the field relates to gender role conflict exacerbated by fear of accusations (Sumsion, 1999). Furthermore, pressure to move into administrative and academic positions lures men away from the classroom (Parnell, 2011).

This study includes six veteran male early childhood teachers and caregivers from different countries. Qualitative methodologies include classroom observations and narrative interviews. Findings show two career choice patterns: self-awareness of a propensity for working with young children, and a midcareer search for personal meaning. Career longevity correlates with familial and societal support, parental approval, job satisfaction, and inertia, which help overcome anxieties arising from gender role conflict. Seen through a cultural lens, the support mechanisms were found to compete with societal norms mitigating against continued employment in the field. Implications for recruitment and retention of men in early childhood settings will be discussed.

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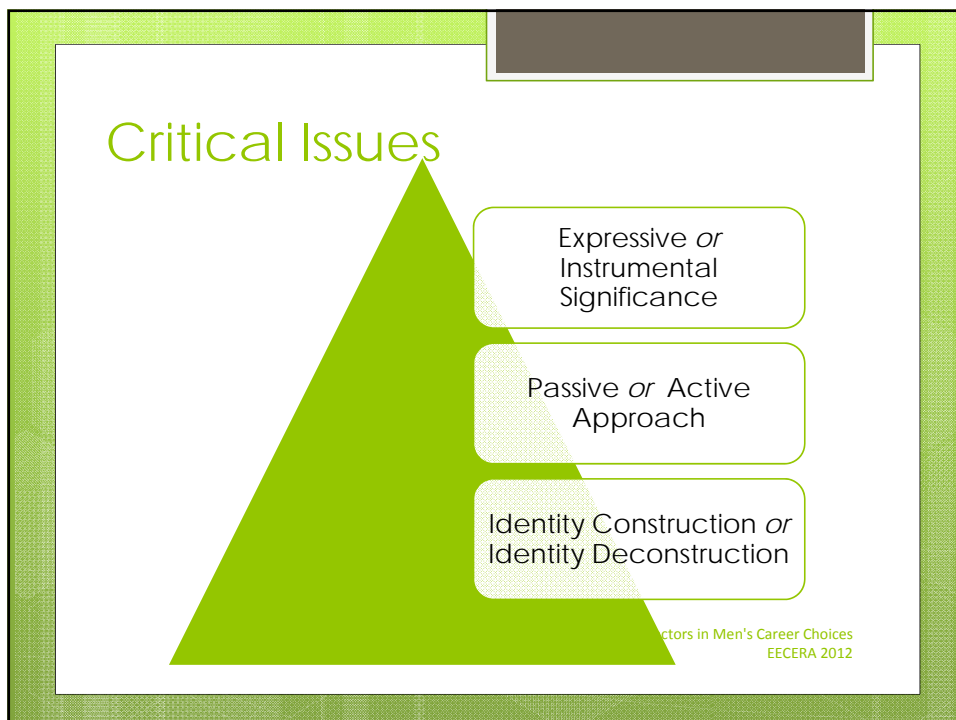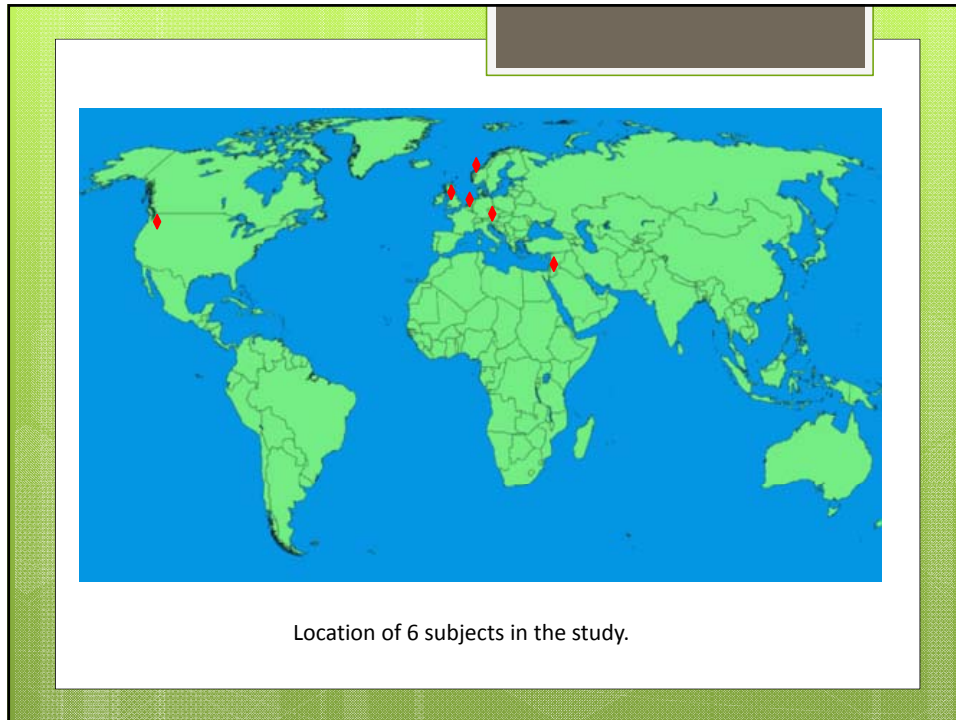
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Location of 6 subjects in the study.

Critical Issues

Expressive *or*
Instrumental
Significance

Passive *or* Active
Approach

Identity Construction *or*
Identity Deconstruction

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Expressive *or* Instrumental Significance

*"I came home one day and asked myself: 'What did you do today?"
...The smile on the face of a child - it was better than 3 months of work at (the transport company)."*

-Benny

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Expressive *or* Instrumental Significance

"I had no real particular focus in my life, I was kind of drifting around for a long time...and people said to me: "Have you ever thought of working with children? You seem to have a really good connection with them", and ... I suppose that I had never thought of working with children, particularly very young children.... it's a job."

-Leon

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Expressive *or* Instrumental Significance

*"And when I graduated, a kindergarten position opened up here at Jefferson School, it was half time, and I took that job. And then a first grade opened up and I taught first grade for probably about 17 years, then a kindergarten teacher retired, so kind of by default, I ended up in kindergarten, **but ended up enjoying it**."*

-Elton

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Active or Passive Approach

"I give this one about three months..."

Trap Door

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Active or Passive Approach

"I (considered) informal education or early childhood. I said that I will go for one of those two … because here I know that I can influence as an educator, pave the way, put forth values and not just go into a classroom to say what I have to say and then leave, rather to give something, something beyond reciting lessons. That's the reason that I went there." -Elli

Front Door   Revolving Door

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Identity Construction vs. Deconstruction

*"I think I make them tougher because I don't
want them with every little pain to come to
me, because when it's really painful I don't
believe them if they are coming a hundred
times before – I have pain, I have pain, I
have pain – and when there is something
really wrong, I don't believe them."*

(continued on next slide)

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Identity Construction vs. Deconstruction

*"So that's why I try to teach them, ok in
Dutch I say* – Pijn is fijn, bloed is goed *: Pain is
nice, Blood is ok! .... I was hanging this
(picture) and (a tack was stuck in my hand).
So I said, 'Ok now, look, look, look – and I was
smiling, but I said – it hurts, but I don't have to
cry ....' It was painful but I didn't need to cry,
it wasn't that bad."* -Levien

"So kind of by default, I ended up in
kindergarten, **but ended up enjoying it**." -
Elton

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Practical implications

- Consider marketing for instrumental as well expressive motivations.
- Second career or late career seekers may prove to be a productive source of candidates.
- Exposure of male degree candidates to ECE settings may prove useful.
- Support novice teachers with positive male role models.

Issues for further research

- How do men construct and deconstruct their gender identity in other female occupations?

- What is the role of different types of significant others (family, friends, mentors) in men's choosing to work and to remain in ECE?

- In what ways do cultural definitions of masculinity effect men's career choices in ECE?

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Thank you for your attention!

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