

Male ECE Students in Post-secondary Classrooms: Enrolment and Retention

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Abstract

This study examines the underrepresentation of male Early Childhood Education (ECE) students in post-secondary classrooms. Through the implementation of a mixed methods design, quantitative data on student enrolment and graduation rates were collected (N=3009) and discussed in the context of the perspectives of male interview participants (n=4). Data collected from a large Ontario college demonstrated that males comprised an average of only 5.4% of students enrolled in the ECE program over an eight-year timespan, and of that demographic (n=159), only 30.8% of male students graduated. This rate was significantly lower than that seen in female students during the same time period. Interviews revealed that male ECE students face a number of deterrents, from bias to gender imbalance in post-secondary classrooms and placement settings. However, these variables can potentially be mitigated through protective factors, for example, connections with faculty, motivation and self-efficacy. In light of the continued low enrolment for male ECE students, and recent downward trend in graduation rates, research-based support strategies are recommended to help increase enrolment and retention.

Keywords: male students, Early Childhood Education, post-secondary, enrolment, retention, support

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The field of Early Childhood Education (ECE) is characterized

by an underrepresentation of male educators. Based on data compiled by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), average international participation in the early learning workforce by male educators is 4% in member countries (OECD, 2015). Current statistics in Canada from the 2011 National Household Survey indicate that national representation for male educators in childcare is 3.2% (Statistics Canada, 2016). This level of participation by male educators has remained relatively static in Canada over the last two decades (Statistics Canada, 2013, 2014a, 2014b, 2016).

Lack of male representation in the field of ECE is intrinsically linked to low male representation at the post-secondary level. In other words, numbers in the field will not increase unless numbers in the classrooms are first examined and addressed. In order to become employed as a registered early childhood educator (RECE) in the province of Ontario, a two-year college diploma is the minimum requirement. Research focused on male ECE students in post-secondary classrooms is extremely limited and, to my knowledge, non-existent in the Ontario context.

A descriptive mixed-methods study from Quebec completed by Besnard and Diren (2010b) addressed enrolment and graduation data for male ECE students in the province. Using data published by the *Service Régional d'Admission du Montréal métropolitain* (SRAM), these researchers found that male students accounted for 3.6% of registrants in ECE programs at publicly funded vocational colleges (CEGEPs), and of that population, only 25% successfully graduated (Besnard & Diren, 2010b). Besnard and Diren (2010b) employed a transversal research strategy to examine the educational experiences of male students, and sought the input of three sample groups: high school students (n=625); registered college students (n=19); and college instructors from ECE programs (n=49). The researchers employed mixed data sampling methods for each group, including a Likert-type survey instrument, semi-structured interviews, and semi-structured focus groups, respectively. Quantitative and

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qualitative data analyses yielded five main findings: (1) prejudice continued to impact viewpoints of male students who opt for non-traditional fields; (2) self-efficacy supported the perseverance of male ECE students, especially for mature students; (3) supportive figures in students' social networks served a protective role; (4) group integration in college classrooms supported program completion; and (5) male ECE students lacked male role models (Besnard & Diren, 2010b).

Despite the paucity of research on the topic of male students in ECE programs, uniform themes have emerged from the existing literature. An examination of current international studies and publications, in conjunction with the above-discussed Quebec study, point towards a commonality in student experiences. Key concepts can be condensed into three major themes: deterrents, protective factors, and strategies to support male ECE students.

Deterrents

Prospective male ECE students face an array of deterrents before stepping into a post-secondary classroom. These deterrents take the form of stereotypes about the male gender's lack of nurturing abilities (Holm, Janairo, Jordan, & Wright, 2013; Piburn, 2011) and the ECE profession itself as low-status "women's work," with the resultant negative connotations associated with that phrase (Crisp & King, 2016; Rich, 2014; Russell, 2013; Tucker, 2015). Perhaps more troubling for potential male ECE students is the stigma associated with male teachers and the sexual abuse of children (Crisp & King, 2016; Weaver-Hightower, 2011; Russell, 2013; Tucker, 2015). In addition, Besnard and Diren (2010a, 2010b) highlighted the fact that male students typically select their career paths in high school, which is a time when they are most susceptible to the influence of stereotypes and their impact on identity formation.

Once accepted into an ECE program, male students continue to be impacted by these stereotypes, especially outside of the classroom context. Biased attitudes that tend to reject or question the motives of male ECE students seem most prevalent in practicum settings. One of the biggest challenges that has been found is in the attitudes of parents whose children attend the childcare centres where male ECE students are placed (Besnard & Diren, 2010b; d'Arcy, 2015; Farquhar, 2012). This bias is often presented in concerns about diaper changing (Besnard & Diren, 2010b, Farquhar, 2012; Nelson & Shikwambi, 2010; Piburn, 2011) and requests to have children placed in a different room (Besnard & Diren, 2010b). Further, biased attitudes have been found in the opinions of ECE professionals tasked with mentoring students in placement settings (Farquhar, 2012). Negative practicum experiences have been identified as a key contributor

to male students withdrawing from ECE programs (Besnard & Diren, 2010a).

Further deterrents faced by male students looking to enroll in an ECE program include low wages and gender imbalance. Low wages for early childhood educators are common throughout multiple countries (Besnard & Diren, 2010b; d'Arcy, 2015; Farquhar, 2012; Holm et al., 2013; Weaver-Hightower, 2011). It should be noted that this factor would also act as a deterrent for prospective female ECE students; however, an examination of the female student experience is beyond the scope of the present study. In Ontario, the average yearly income for an ECE was listed at \$27,351 in 2010, less than half of the average income of \$61,495 across all occupations (Government of Ontario, 2017). Once in the classroom, male ECE students experience the challenges of gender imbalance—many are often the only male student (Friedman, 2010; Russell, 2013; Tucker, 2015). This imbalance could lead to feelings of isolation (d'Arcy, 2015; Weaver-Hightower, 2011). Further, a series of implicit exclusions, for example, teachers that only use feminine pronouns and class materials that only depict images of female educators, may highlight a male student's outsider status (Nelson & Shikwambi, 2010; Piburn, 2011). These above-mentioned deterrents coincide with both low enrolment and high rates of attrition for male students in post-secondary ECE programs (Besnard & Diren, 2010a, Nelson & Shikwambi, 2010).

Protective Factors

Perseverance of male students in ECE programs has been attributed to a variety of personal attributes that can be condensed into the following factors: age, self-efficacy, and motivation. Besnard and Diren (2010a, 2010b) cited age as a major contributing factor to program retention, and identified mature students as demonstrating a greater ability to adapt within a female-dominated educational setting. Male ECE students with previous professional work or post-secondary experience also demonstrated an increased likelihood of succeeding in ECE programs and their ensuing careers (Friedman, 2010; Nelson & Shikwambi, 2010).

Self-efficacy has also been linked with perseverance in ECE programs for male students (Besnard & Diren, 2010b; Friedman, 2010; Weaver-Hightower, 2011). Faced with multiple challenges, from bias to isolation, male students seem to thrive when they employ "winning strategies" (Besnard & Diren, 2010a, p. 3). Some of these strategies include: seeking support, demonstrating initiative, patience, and the ability to adapt (Besnard & Diren, 2010a). Related to self-efficacy is the motivation to support others, specifically children who lack a male role model

(Friedman, 2010; Ho, 2016; Russell, 2013); this internal drive helped male ECE students overcome obstacles (Weaver-Hightower, 2011). Motivation for teaching, often referred to as “passion,” is another common thread among successful male ECE students (Friedman, 2010; Nelson & Shikwambi, 2010; Russell, 2013).

An additional—and possibly controversial—protective factor identified is the issue of perceived or actual special treatment. While male students have been identified as a numerical minority in ECE programs, they have still benefited from the privilege associated with being male (d’Arcy, 2015; Weaver-Hightower, 2011). Besnard and Diren (2010b) posit that male ECE students may also occasionally be “appreciated, mothered and pampered” (p. 3214) in the classroom environment and placement settings, which may artificially increase their ability to succeed in the program. Further exploration of privilege in relation to the educational experiences of male students in non-traditional fields is an important undertaking that extends beyond the scope of the present study.

Strategies to Support Male ECE Students

Researchers that have examined the perspectives of male ECE students have identified strategies to support these students at the post-secondary level. While there are commonalities in the ideas presented, these recommendations have not yet been validated through longitudinal studies. Suggestions that recur throughout the literature on male ECE students include scholarships, mentoring, and supportive environments.

Scholarships for male ECE students have been proposed as a support mechanism. However, the strategy of providing financial incentives to boost male enrolment numbers (Holm, Janairo, Jordan, & Wright, 2013; Nelson & Shikwambi, 2010; Russell, 2013) has been met with some resistance. The argument against some form of male-centric scholarship is that it creates a system of inequity that favours male students over prospective female students (d’Arcy, 2015; Farquhar, 2012). Further, as stated in the previous section, the historical tradition of men as a dominant, as opposed to an oppressed, segment of the population precludes them from equity-focused financial opportunities (d’Arcy, 2015).

In light of the aforementioned challenges faced by male ECE students, a less controversial proposal is to link these students with a responsive faculty mentor (d’Arcy, 2015, Friedman, 2010; Nelson & Shikwambi, 2010). Nelson and Shikwambi (2010) supported the strategy of offering positive mentoring experiences as it has been shown to reduce attrition rates. The possibility of placing male students with male mentors, specifically in practicum settings, has been suggested

to help bolster transitions into the ECE work environment (Besnard & Diren, 2010a, d’Arcy, 2015).

In addition to mentorship programs, the practice of ensuring inclusive, anti-bias classrooms and practicum environments has been proposed to actively support male ECE students. Nelson and Shikwambi (2010) highlighted the importance of examining the “cultural climate” (p. 39) created by faculty and placement teachers; biases must first be recognized before they can be addressed. In addition, language used in the classroom should be gender-inclusive (Nelson & Shikwambi, 2010) along with the images contained in course readings and presentations (Piburn, 2011).

Although many key issues pertinent to male ECE students have been identified, there remains a gap in the research on educational experiences in the multicultural Greater Toronto Area (GTA). The purpose of the present study was to expand the body of knowledge on the enrolment and retention of male ECE students in post-secondary classrooms. Encompassing a time span of eight years, from 2008 to 2015, this analysis of enrolment, graduation and interview data aimed to provide a portrait of male involvement at a large Ontario college. In addition, the present study sought to confirm and expand upon previously identified support strategies for male ECE students, as identified by Besnard and Diren (2010a, 2010b). For the purpose of this paper, the designation of “male” or “female” was based on how students chose to identify themselves within the college’s record system.

The study by Besnard and Diren (2010a, 2010b) was the most comprehensive and applicable study on male ECE students to date. Given the geographical proximity of Quebec and Ontario, it was hypothesized that enrolment and graduation rates at an Ontario college would be similar to those found in Quebec, with male enrolment and graduation rates comparable to 3.6% and 25%, respectively (Besnard & Diren, 2010a). Beyond attempting to replicate their findings in a different provincial context, the present study also aimed to expand on their work in order to further delineate the extent of male underrepresentation in post-secondary ECE programs in culturally diverse regions of the country. In addition to the quantitative analysis of enrolment and graduation data, the present study sought to further identify factors that contribute to male students successfully completing the ECE program, with a goal of highlighting additional targeted support strategies.

Method

In order to gain a more detailed understanding of the male ECE student experience at a large Ontario college, a mixed methods approach was employed. The quantitative component of this study

provided descriptive and inferential statistics related to enrolment and graduation rates for male ECE students. The qualitative component provided context to these numbers through a series of one-on-one, semi-structured interviews with male students currently enrolled in the ECE program and those that had graduated.

Prior to the collection of data and completion of interviews, this study received approval from the institution's Research Ethics Board (REB). Due to the potential power imbalance inherent in teacher-student relationships, a third-party researcher from the institution completed participant recruitment and gathering of informed consent for interviews.

Participants

The qualitative component of this study was comprised of one-on-one, semi-structured interviews with male ECE students and graduates of the ECE program. Invitations to participate in the study were sent by email via a third-party researcher to current and former male ECE students using email addresses on file at the college. Respondents completed an informed consent form and their contact information was forwarded to the researcher. Several limitations restricted the number of participants in these interviews. First, the low number of male students enrolled in the ECE program at the college limited the population size. Second, due to ethical concerns about a power imbalance, the study excluded any students that were registered in courses taught by the researcher (n=6). In total, four students were interviewed, with one participant being a graduate of the program.

Materials

The quantitative component of this study involved ECE students at a single Ontario college, who self-identified their gender as male, as the target population (n=159). The ECE diploma program at this college requires two years to complete. Enrolment and graduation data were initially gathered through password-protected spreadsheets from the registrar's office for a five-year period (September 2009 – April 2015) to allow for three graduating cohorts (n=1442). Initial analysis of these data pointed towards a gradual and consistent decline in graduation rates for male ECE students starting in Fall 2011 (see Figure 1). To confirm whether this decline was part of an ongoing trend, enrolment and graduation data were gathered from the preceding, and overlapping, five-year period (September 2008 – April 2012) to allow for another three graduating cohorts (n=1567). In total, data were collected for an eight-year period (September 2008 – April 2015) to allow for six graduating cohorts (N=3009).

The qualitative interview protocol (see Appendix) contained a simple opening question that focussed on demographic

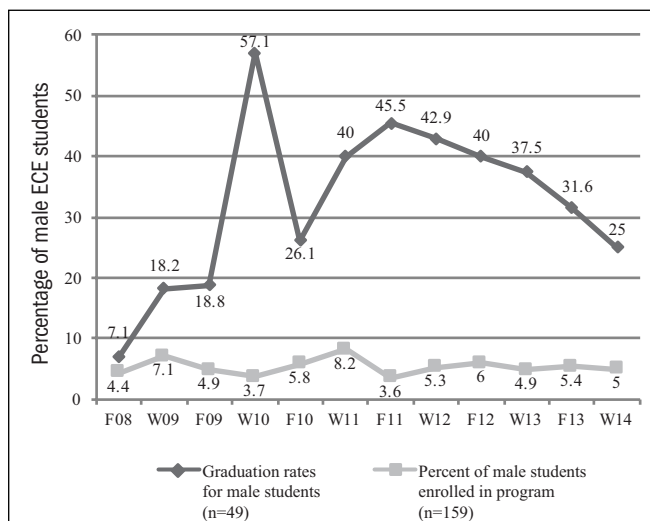


Figure 1. Enrolment data in relation to graduation rates for male ECE students.

information, followed by four open-ended questions, for example, what factors contributed to you applying for the ECE program at this college? After the predetermined questions ended, interview participants were given the opportunity to add any further comments or expand upon previous ideas.

Procedure

The collection of quantitative data included both fall and winter intakes into the ECE program, and excluded the summer intake. Although the fall and winter cohorts started at different times, they graduated at the same time (April), which allowed for comparison between data sets with similar variables. In other words, the students in both strands experienced similar educational environments, for example, academic policies and curriculum, concurrently. The different graduation schedule for students in the summer intake (December) meant that they could be exposed to new variables in their final semester of study, for example, updated policies and curriculum content. Further, due to the small number of students in a typical summer intake, for example, one section of students compared with multiple sections in the fall/winter, the disparity in sample size would have made it more difficult to draw comparisons between the groups. With summer intake data excluded, the enrolment and completion data for fall and winter intakes then formed a non-random sample to allow for calculation of descriptive and inferential statistics. Male enrolment and graduation rates were compared between the fall and winter cohorts and against female rates, using the Z-ratio to test for the significance of difference between two independent proportions.

In terms of the qualitative component of the present study, the researcher arranged interviews with students who

had submitted their informed consent form to the third-party researcher. Interviews were conducted and audio-recorded in available office space at the college, and lasted between 15-20 minutes in duration. The participants were provided with a ten-dollar gift card as a token of thanks. Interview data files were then transcribed by the researcher using the *Transcribe* web app available on the Google Chrome web browser. The resulting transcripts were analyzed using a coding system developed by the researcher and condensed into themes consistent with those from the literature, including deterrents, protective factors, and support strategies.

Results

Quantitative Analysis

The data for each graduating cohort were divided into two separate strands, the fall and winter intakes. Although the fall intake accounted for more students ($n=2032$) than the winter intake ($n=977$), the proportion of males in each cohort did not differ significantly, $Z = -0.76, p > 0.05$. Specifically, over the course of six graduating cohorts from September 2008 to April

2015, the average percentage of male students enrolled in the fall was 5.0% ($M = 17$ students, $SD = 4.0$), and for the winter intake was 5.7% ($M = 9$ students, $SD = 2.9$) (see Table 1). Because the proportions did not differ, these two sets of cohorts were combined for subsequent analyses.

Enrolment

Over the span of eight years, male students accounted for a total of 5.3% of students enrolled in the ECE program at the college (see Table 1). This proportion was significantly lower than that of their female counterparts, who comprised 94.7%, $Z = -69.4, p < 0.001$.

Graduation Rates

The overall graduation rate for male students was 30.8% ($n=49$ graduates), or approximately one-third of the enrolled male students (see Table 2). Further, the overall rate for female students was 47.1% ($n=1342$), or roughly one-half of the enrolled female students. A Z-test revealed a significant difference in the graduation rates for male and female students, with a significantly greater proportion of females graduating than males, $Z = -4.00, p < 0.001$.

Table 1

Enrolment data: Percent of students identified as male

Cohort start date	Cohort end date	Male	Female	Total	Percentage male
F08	S10	14	302	316	4.4%
W09	S10	11	143	154	7.1%
F09	S11	16	312	328	4.9%
W10	S11	7	181	188	3.7%
F10	S12	23	376	399	5.8%
W11	S12	15	167	182	8.2%
F11	S13	11	294	305	3.6%
W12	S13	7	124	131	5.3%
F12	S14	20	315	335	6.0%
W13	S14	8	155	163	4.9%
F13	S15	19	330	349	5.4%
W14	S15	8	151	159	5.0%
Totals (N=3009)		159 Overall Percent 5.3%	2850 Overall Percent 94.7%	3,009	Average $M=5.4\%$
		Fall $M = 17$ Winter $M = 9$		Average Fall $M = 339$ Average Winter $M = 163$	Average Fall $M = 5.0$ Average Winter $M = 5.7$

Note. "F" indicates fall intake (September), "W" indicates winter intake (January), and "S" indicates spring completion of the program (April).

Trends in the Data

Although the overall proportion of males enrolled in the fall and winter cohorts did not differ significantly, an examination of the graduation rates revealed some interesting trends. While the quantity of male graduates was greater in the fall cohorts (n=29) versus the winter (n=20), the graduation rates appeared to differ (see Figure 1). In terms of percentage, 28.2% of male students in the fall strand (n=103) graduated, compared to 35.7% of male students in the winter strand (n=56); a difference of 7.5 percentage points. However, a Z-test for independent proportions revealed that this difference was not significant, $Z = -0.99$, $p > 0.05$. While the average graduation rate for male students may be higher for the winter intake, there was similar variability in the data for each cohort. Further, seemingly anomalous graduation rates, for example, 57.1% in Winter 2010 and 7.1% in Fall 2008, most likely skewed the data for both strands (see Figure 2).

The graduation rates for male students were plotted on a line graph and transposed with the enrollment data outlined in Table 1 (see Figure 1). Once these two data sets were combined, an intriguing alignment between the numbers for graduation rates and

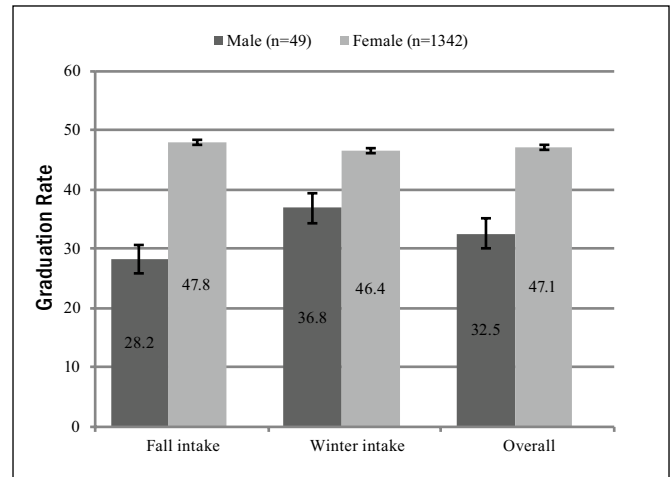


Figure 2. A comparison between fall, winter, and overall graduation rates for ECE students. Error bars depict the standard error for each group.

male representation became visible. The two highest graduation rates, 57.1% (Winter 2010) and 45.5% (Fall 2011), coincided with the lowest enrollment of male students at 3.7% and 3.6% respectively. While it is tempting to speculate on the meaning of this trend, the very small sample sizes preclude that possibility.

Table 2

Success rates: Percent of enrolled male and female ECE students who graduated

Cohort start date	Cohort end date	Male graduated/enrolled	Female graduated/enrolled	Percentage male graduates	Percentage female graduates
F08	S10	1/14	120/302	7.1%	39.7%
W09	S10	2/11	56/143	18.2%	39.2%
F09	S11	3/16	120/312	18.8%	38.5%
W10	S11	4/7	74/181	57.1%	40.9%
F10	S12	6/23	162/376	26.1%	43.1%
W11	S12	6/15	75/167	40.0%	44.9%
F11	S13	5/11	170/294	45.5%	57.8%
W12	S13	3/7	72/124	42.9%	58.1%
F12	S14	8/20	169/315	40.0%	53.7%
W13	S14	3/8	78/155	37.5%	50.3%
F13	S15	6/19	178/330	31.6%	53.9%
W14	S15	2/8	68/151	25%	45.0%
Totals (N=3009)		49/159 Overall 30.8%	1342/2850 Overall 47.1%	Average $M = 32.5\%$	Average $M = 47.1\%$
				Average Fall $M = 28.2$ Total Fall 28.2%	Average Fall $M = 47.8$ Average Winter $M = 46.4$
				Average Winter $M = 36.8$ Total Winter 35.7%	

Note. "F" indicates fall intake (September), "W" indicates winter intake (January), and "S" indicates spring completion of the program (April).

As noted previously, a downward trend in graduation rates was observed after Fall 2011 (see Figure 1). Interestingly, enrolment remained relatively stable during this time, with 4.9% at the lowest point (Winter 2013) and 6% at the highest point (Fall 2012). A χ^2 contingency table analysis revealed that none of the differences in proportions over the eight year period were statistically significant, $\chi^2(11) = 11.38, p > 0.05$. Still, while enrolment remained fairly constant between 2012 and 2014, graduation rates dropped from 42.9% in Winter 2012 to 25% in Winter 2014. Whether this drop in graduation rates represents a meaningful trend, or just random variation, is not clear, and warrants further investigation.

Qualitative Analysis

To further understand and contextualize the enrolment and graduation data, one-on-one, semi-structured interviews were conducted with four male students who either completed, or were enrolled in the ECE program. The students in the study were given the following pseudonyms (in alphabetical order): Amir, Bill, Chris and Jake. Of these students, Bill had successfully graduated from the ECE program, while Amir, Chris and Jake were at various stages in their programs.

In order to analyze the qualitative data, interview transcripts were coded, based on a broad range of descriptors, and then condensed into themes by the researcher. Two over-arching components or major themes present in the literature on male ECE students became apparent throughout the coding of the data: deterrents and protective factors. These themes were drawn from the existing literature on male ECE students, and the researcher identified additional sub-themes that arose. Specifically, each major theme was broken down into four related sub-themes (see Figure 3). For deterrents, the sub-themes included gender imbalance, salary, bias and external factors, while the subthemes for protective factors included experience, job prospects, support systems and personal attributes. In addition, all students offered input on support strategies throughout the interviews, and these insights were combined into a separate discussion following the thematic analysis.

Deterrents

Gender Imbalance. All four students experienced gender imbalance in school and placement settings. Amir observed that there were “many, many female teachers in the child care centre, and then school, where [he] was placed.” Two students, Bill and Chris, stated that they were the only male students in their classes. Chris jokingly described how the faculty would say “good morning ladies, and Chris,” at the beginning of class. Both Bill and Jake used the word “awkward” to describe the experience of

being the only male in a college classroom. Bill described how, at first, he thought to himself, “what am I getting into?” On the other hand, Jake, who had previous experience in the field through placement and work opportunities, stated that it “wasn’t really a shock to [him] being around all girls.”

Salary. Two students, Jake and Chris, described hearing feedback from peer groups and work groups that the pay for ECEs was low. Jake mentioned some concern about wages, but stated that “it will work out, I’m not too stressed out about the pay and everything” and further cited his passion for the career as a driving factor in his decision-making process. Chris cited the Ontario wage enhancement (Government of Ontario, 2016) as proof that wages are starting to increase in the ECE sector. In contrast, when asked to provide any additional information not covered in the interview, Bill described low wages as a major barrier for male students entering the ECE field because “you will not be able to support a family on this salary.”

Bias. All of the students interviewed described experiencing biased attitudes about the ECE profession, in general, and male involvement in childcare. Chris and Bill specifically mentioned hearing the stereotype that the ECE profession is “babysitting.” In addition, the interviewees experienced the stereotype that the male gender cannot effectively interact with young children. Bill mentioned that male ECE students confront layered stereotypes and that “you have to [fight] both, it’s discouraging.”

Amir, Chris and Jake specifically mentioned having their ability to work with young children either overtly or covertly called into question. Amir mentioned that he was specifically asked by one of the co-operating teachers at placement why he, as a male student, was in the ECE program. Amir stated that this question “shocked [him] ... [and was] difficult to face,” especially when it was coming from a professional in the field. In one placement, Chris felt that the teachers limited his interactions with the children by having him “doing a lot of cleaning.” During a work experience, Jake felt “condemned” by another staff member when, during a typical adult-child hug, the child kissed him without any warning. The staff member then stated to Jake, “if anyone ever saw that ... you would have never been able to work in a daycare ever again.” Jake further mentioned that he was aware of the “stigma” associated with male educators who work with young children.

External factors. For all interviewees, the bias they experienced towards male educators was primarily experienced outside of the college setting. The three major sources of bias were friends, parents at the childcare, and ECE professionals (including co-operating teachers and co-workers). Jake and

Chris received negative responses from friends with regard to their decision to pursue ECE qualifications. Jake stated that “a lot of people [gave] him a hard time [about the] pay scale,” and Chris felt pressure from friends who asked him: “why do you want to get into that?” In addition to friends, this questioning of intent extended to parents at the childcare centres. Chris stated that he felt he was “looked at differently by the parents,” while Jake said the he felt “the parents look at [him] like, ‘who’s this guy in here?’”

Amir described how his decision to pursue ECE qualifications was questioned by the co-operating teacher at placement. He further discussed how he felt the need to prove his worth as an ECE throughout the semester, and only felt accepted after successfully demonstrating the required competencies. Jake received negative viewpoints about the ECE profession from co-workers, for example, the low pay, and was not supported by a coworker during the kissing incident (see above). Chris described how a male colleague of his had a discussion with an ECE in the field that resulted in discouragement. This colleague was told that being an ECE “was a lot of work for very little pay ... [and] that a lot of the female teachers kind of take advantage of you.” Chris further explained how his colleague’s grades began to decrease, and how he contemplated withdrawing from the program, all because of “one little conversation with someone else.”

Protective Factors

Experience. There was a convergence in demographic details for the interviewees in that they all had some form of professional work/study experience prior to entering the ECE program. Two students, Jake and Amir, had direct experience working with young children. Jake gained childcare experience through an organization that offered paid community placements and Amir taught elementary-level children in private school settings. The other two students, Bill and Chris, had previous unrelated full-time work and post-secondary school experience, respectively, before enrolling at the college.

Job prospects. Each of the four students described motivation to get a job as an important factor in regards to pursuing ECE qualifications. Bill came to the ECE program through an employment agency because of restructuring at his previous employment. For Jake, the community placement led to paid work with children, and he viewed ECE as a stable option to help support his creative pursuits. Chris cited a lack of career options in his previous area of studies, and brought up the point of better prospects in this field as a male. Further, he was aware of the limited number of males in the field of ECE, and saw this as an advantage. Chris seemed unsettled with this

position of privilege, and brought up the point that this advantage he felt over female job candidates made him feel uncomfortable, or “weird” as he put it. The fourth student, Amir, was also aware of the need for male educators in the field of ECE, and mentioned this as a contributing factor to pursuing ECE instead of elementary or secondary qualifications. In addition, three of the four students specifically mentioned the enjoyment factor involved in working with young children. When completing his research about the ECE program, Chris said that it looked “exciting and fun,” and Jake stated that if “more guys knew what [we] did here, I think they’d love it.”

Support systems. Each of the four students identified the importance of personal, professional, or organizational supports that helped them either get in to, or succeed in the ECE program. Both Chris and Jake identified specific family members as supporting them with their decision to enter the ECE program. At the college, all four students mentioned that the supportive learning environment was related to their successful completion of courses. Faculty members were specifically identified in terms of being supportive and making them feel welcome in the program regardless of their identified gender. Amir felt that faculty “treated [him] equally” and Jake used the word “unbiased” to describe his teachers. Jake mentioned a specific teacher that took extra time to meet with him when he was feeling “stressed and overwhelmed,” and how this helped him persevere in the program.

In addition to the faculty, two students described their peers as being part of their professional support system. Bill identified that “other students kept [him] going,” especially when faced with the challenges of multiple assignments and field placement responsibilities. Further, Bill identified the sense of community, and resulting feeling of belonging that had developed in his cohort, as an important factor in his successful graduation from the program. Chris specifically addressed the importance that humour played in his interactions with other students, especially since he was the only male student in the classroom.

Outside of the classroom setting, two of the students identified support systems at the community level. Bill was directed to the field of ECE through an employment agency, and Jake first experienced childcare through a community placement organization. Further, once at school, Jake found support through services offered at the college, for example, student writing services.

Personal attributes. Throughout the interviews, each of the students demonstrated similar personality traits that link with their progression in the ECE program. These traits can be

condensed to three primary traits: *commitment*, *confidence*, and *self-efficacy*.

In terms of commitment, both Amir and Jake used the word “passion” to describe their interest in becoming an educator, which links with the fact that both Amir and Jake had teaching experience prior to registering in the ECE program at the college.

Confidence can be measured in terms of the students’ perceived ability to respond to overt or subtle challenges to their ability to work with young children. In response to being questioned about his decision to enroll in the ECE program while at placement, Amir responded by saying that “[there are] two things I cannot do in this field, bearing a child and breastfeeding.” A parent at Bill’s placement asked him, “How can you do this?” While this question seems rhetorical and good-natured at first glance, a male student already doubting their place in the program could interpret it negatively. Bill responded to the parent by saying, “it just takes a lot of patience.” Chris, who felt that the parents were taken aback by his presence in the childcare, made it a personal goal to introduce himself to each parent at the centre.

Though related to confidence, self-efficacy involves more finely tuned responses from an individual. As defined by Bandura (1977), self-efficacy refers to how “people process, weigh, and integrate diverse sources of information concerning their capability, and they regulate their choice behavior and effort expenditure accordingly” (p. 212). Amir, Chris and Jake described that they were exposed to individuals with biased attitudes during placement, but persevered using different strategies. Amir decided to take action and consulted his co-operating teacher, but continued to feel like he had to prove his worth. Chris and Jake identified more passive strategies. At placement, Chris overheard teachers talking about him in the lunchroom. Instead of confronting the staff or becoming deterred by the situation, Chris stated that it “wasn’t that big of a deal. I got through it and I passed with a good grade. You take that to the side [*sic*][and] you don’t let it bother you.” Jake shared a similar nonchalant response, and attributed co-workers’ negative views of the ECE profession to their “personal problems ... [and] projecting their own issues” instead of internalizing their criticism.

Student Suggested Support Strategies

In addition to providing details on deterrents and protective factors, each student identified potential strategies to both attract and retain male students. These strategies were condensed into two major areas and include *classroom-level* strategies implemented by faculty, and *institution-level* strategies requiring the support of the organization.

Classroom-level. The classroom-level strategies suggested by the interviewees included: one-on-one interactions, group work opportunities, and course content on appropriate touch. The first two measures were already being practiced at the institution where these students attended, however, consistency across faculty (both full and part time) has not been assessed. In terms of one-on-one interactions, Amir noted the importance of seeking “regular feedback from teachers and ... [having] a good connection with them.” Chris and Jake both specifically mentioned the phrase “one-on-one time” in their suggestions for supporting male ECE students. Chris suggested that these types of interactions could help male students, not only in terms of clarifying course content, but to support students as they adapt to the program and “talk about the differences [of being a male ECE student and] how it’s affecting you.”

Along with connections with faculty, group work was suggested as a support strategy for male students. Two students described the importance of having connections with other students in the classroom, and that these peer support groups enhanced their ability to feel integrated in the program and persevere with coursework. Jake mentioned that group work acted as an icebreaker, which helped him get to know other students in the program. Bill found that group work was “helpful because [they] could bounce ideas off each other if anything [was] unclear,” whereas if you’re working by yourself and have “writer’s block ... you have to dig yourself out.”

The final classroom-level strategy involved the inclusion of guidelines for appropriate touch in the ECE program’s curriculum. Jake mentioned that in the toddler room at his placement, every time he would “sit down, like guaranteed ... one or two [toddlers] come and try and ... sit on me.” Jake described that he “think[s] it’s okay,” but a “little bit of reassurance” would help him feel less “awkward,” especially being a male working with young children. If appropriate touch was clearly explained and covered in class, Jake mentioned that male ECE students would feel more comfortable at placement during their interactions with children.

Institution-level. Several strategies offered by the interviewees would require implementation by departmental or administrative teams, and included: supportive environments outside of the classroom, financial support, and a greater male presence. In order to further support male ECE students at the college, three students specifically discussed the importance of supportive environments, especially in practicum settings. Amir, Chris and Jake described how they experienced ECE professionals with biased attitudes about male students and the profession in general. As a strategy, Amir and Chris proposed that having male

ECE students placed with co-operating teachers who consistently practice an inclusive approach would be beneficial.

Three of the four students identified the importance of having a male presence in either the faculty or student population. For Bill, who was also the only male student in his class, having a male faculty member as a teacher was important and confirmed that “there are males in classroom.” Both Jake and Amir mentioned the importance of having other male students in the classroom. Jake found it reassuring to have “someone ... you can relate to” in the classroom. Amir echoed this sentiment, and reached out to a male student who stopped attending class to offer himself and another male student as a support system.

General Discussion

Male Representation

The data analyzed in the present study covered an eight-year span at an ECE program situated in a large Ontario college and revealed similar enrolment and graduation rates for male ECE students when compared to data from Quebec, as hypothesized (Besnard & Diren, 2010a, 2010b). In terms of the enrolment of male ECE students, the averages between the two were comparable, with 5.4% in Ontario and 3.6% in Quebec (Besnard & Diren, 2010b). Graduation rates for male ECE students were slightly higher in Ontario, with one-third (30.8%) of enrolled students graduating as opposed to one-quarter (25%) of male ECE students in Quebec (Besnard & Diren, 2010b). While the average enrolment and graduation rates for male ECE students at the Ontario college were slightly higher, this variation in the data may partially be explained by differences in sample size. The data presented in this study were based on a single institution over an eight-year span, while the Quebec data were based on multiple institutions over a ten-year span (Besnard & Diren, 2010b).

Special Treatment

Although an increased male presence was suggested by the participants in the present study as a possible support strategy, at the same time, having a limited number of male students in the classroom may yet be advantageous. The quantitative data in the present study showed that the two highest graduation rates for male ECE students coincided with the two lowest percentages of male enrolment (see Figure 1). Moreover, Besnard and Diren (2010b) raised the possibility of actual or perceived special treatment for males, as a minority in the classroom; they specifically quoted a male student who said that “[teachers] take care of us a bit more because they do not want us to leave” (p. 3211). This may also be controversial for some, especially when framed by the concept of male privilege. Further, special

treatment calls into question the professionalism of faculty. While this link between graduation rates and enrolment could be coincidental, it is important for ECE programs to take steps to avoid actual and perceived special treatment for male students (d’Arcy, 2015). An examination of classroom composition, for example, assessing whether male ECE students have demonstrated significantly higher graduation rates when randomly spread throughout multiple course sections versus being purposefully grouped together in a cohort model, could potentially inform the development of new intervention approaches.

Recommended Support Strategies

The quantitative analysis of graduation data presented in this study showed a significant difference between male and female ECE students. Given that two-thirds of male students who enroll in ECE leave the program before completion, there is an urgent need to devise support strategies to reduce such high levels of attrition. The interviews in the present study corroborate previous evidence that suggests that male ECE students are confronted with multiple deterrents, including gender imbalance, wage uncertainty, and biased interactions, often before they even step into a post-secondary classroom.

The interview data contained many similarities with the literature on male ECE students, for example, the pervasiveness of negative stereotypes (Besnard & Diren, 2010a, 2010b) and the importance of making connections with faculty (Nelson & Shikwambi, 2010). The strategies discussed below (see Figure 4) were drawn from interviews with male ECE students for this study and the literature on the topic of male ECE students. These support strategies are divided into two levels of implementation: organizational strategies requiring administrative oversight and teaching strategies delivered by faculty. Absent from this discussion of recommended strategies is the implementation of financial incentives for male ECE students. Scholarships are not being proposed, given the controversy surrounding inequity for

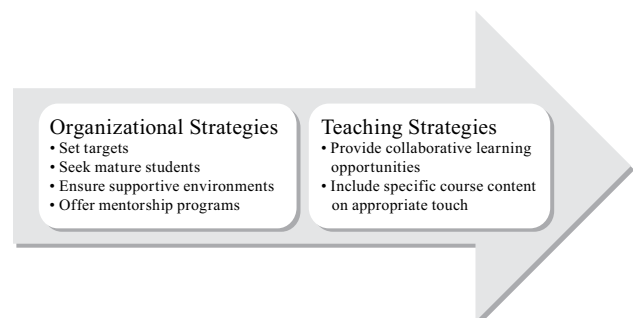


Figure 4. Recommended support strategies to increase the enrolment and retention of male ECE students.

other minority groups, especially groups that may not have the same level of access and privilege traditionally associated with the male gender.

Organizational Strategies

Set targets. In the interviews completed for this study, both Amir and Bill stressed the importance of change at the institutional level to enhance male involvement in ECE programs and childcare. An achievable strategy that can be implemented by institutions is setting targets for male involvement. Jones (2009) identifies the necessity of setting specific targets in childcare and the resulting positive impacts in several European countries. Yang (2013) further writes, “no countries ... have managed to increase male participation without specific government policies to encourage it” (p. 6). At the college level, ECE departments should identify current statistics on male enrolment in the program and set reasonable targets for growth. The average enrolment for male students was identified as 5.4% in this study and hence, the target for enrolment could be set in the range of 6-10% depending on feedback from stakeholders. These targets would serve to coordinate efforts to increase male participation in the ECE program.

Seek mature students. All of the students interviewed in this study had formalized work/study experiences before enrolling in the ECE program, which differs from the traditional direct-entry from high school pathway. Amir and Jake had previous educational experience with young children, while Bill and Chris had engaged in previous work and post-secondary studies respectively. Profiles of successful male educators often mention work and school experience as well (Friedman, 2010; Nelson & Shikwambi, 2010). Besnard and Diren (2010b), highlighted the link between maturity and perseverance in ECE programs in their research and recommend targeting mature students as a recruitment strategy. Besnard and Diren (2010b) also found that mature students often demonstrate comfort in their identity and seem less impacted by stereotypes. Further, they suggested that the life experience of mature students often resulted in having increased confidence while navigating the deterrents faced by male educators (Besnard & Diren, 2010b). Targeted advertisements addressing mature male students/employees, combined with collaborations with community employment agencies, would help support the implementation of this support strategy.

Ensure supportive environments. One of the key deterrents faced by male ECE students is the persistence of negative stereotypes and resulting biased opinions faced outside of the college classroom. While the students interviewed noted support

from faculty, three of the four students had negative interactions at practicum and workplace settings. Amir and Chris specified that students should be placed in centres that provide responsive and inclusive environments for male ECE students. Chris shared a story of a colleague who almost ended his studies because of a negative interaction with a professional in the field. Indeed, Besnard and Diren (2010a) noted that negative placement experiences are often the “trigger that leads [male students] to leave the program” (p. 3). Practicum settings should be reviewed for discriminatory practices, e.g., not allowing male students to change diapers when female students are allowed, and should be provided with resources to help alleviate parent/guardian misconceptions about male students.

Offer mentorship programs. Once in the program, male ECE students should have the opportunity to be linked with a mentor. Three of the four students interviewed mentioned the importance of connecting with faculty as a support measure. Chris and Jake specifically mentioned that faculty could help male students to integrate into the program by providing a discussion partner. The idea of linking male ECE students with a responsive mentor is supported in the literature (Besnard & Diren, 2010b; Nelson & Shikwambi, 2010) and is evident in profiles on successful male educators (Friedman, 2010).

Teaching Strategies

Provide collaborative learning opportunities. Collaborative learning opportunities allow students to engage with their peers, expand their knowledge base and build social competencies (Osterholt & Barratt, 2010). In the interviews, Bill and Jake highlighted the importance of group work in supporting peer integration and collaborative problem solving. While these types of learning opportunities are promoted at the College in this study, the consistency of practice across faculty (both full and part time) is unknown. Discussions on this topic at faculty meetings could help draw the connection between collaborative learning opportunities and social integration for male students. Further, hands-on, collaborative learning classrooms have been identified as particularly supportive of male ECE students (Besnard & Diren, 2010a).

Include specific course content on appropriate touch. A major deterrent faced by male students interested in pursuing the ECE profession is the unnerving stereotype of male educators being sexual predators (Crisp & King, 2016; Russell, 2013; Tucker, 2015; Weaver-Hightower, 2011). The impact of this stereotype, as discussed by Jake in his interview, is the creation of doubt in male ECE students that can hinder their positive interactions with children in placement settings. Jake was unsure about something

as common and essential to quality care as toddlers sitting on a teacher's lap to read a book. To address this stereotype, and reassure male ECE students, specific course content should be developed that provides guidelines for appropriate touch. Besnard and Diren (2010a) support this strategy and specifically mention providing students with strategies to address false accusations. Blatz (as cited in Ho, 2016) describes the importance of developing *touch* policies, as opposed to the common no-touch policy found in elementary schools, to support positive interactions with children.

Conclusions

The underrepresentation of male educators in the field of ECE (Statistics Canada, 2016) is consistent with numbers found in post-secondary classrooms (Besnard & Diren, 2010b). This study found that in one Ontario college, the average enrolment for male ECE students was 5.4% over an eight-year time span, and of that population only about a third of male students graduated from the ECE program. In post-secondary ECE classrooms, male students face a number of deterrents, from bias to gender imbalance. However, these variables can potentially be mitigated through protective factors, for example, connections with faculty, motivation and self-efficacy.

With the continued low enrolment for male ECE students, and recent downward trend in graduation rates, the following evidence-based support strategies are recommended to help increase enrolment and retention: set targets for increased male participation; seek mature students through advertising and liaisons with community agencies; ensure supportive environments in classroom and practicum settings; offer mentorship programs; provide collaborative learning experiences in the classroom; and include specific course content on appropriate touch.

Limitations and Future Research

The scope of this study is limited to issues that impact enrolment and retention for male ECE students in post-secondary classrooms. Absent from this study is an examination of the benefits of male involvement, as the framing of the discussions presented in this study are based on occupational segregation as opposed to teaching efficacy.

In terms of the quantitative and qualitative components of this study, both the collection of enrolment data and involvement of interview participants encountered limitations with sample size. For the quantitative data, some of the statistical variance in the numbers for male students could be the result of a smaller sample size when compared with female students. In terms of

the qualitative component, the low enrollment numbers for male students limited the population size. This limitation became more pronounced given the number of male students who were enrolled in courses taught by the researcher, and thereby excluded from participation.

A further limitation on this study includes the lack of interview data from male students who left the program before graduating. While invitations to participate were sent through email via a third-party recruiter, no responses were received. This is an important area for future research, to identify factors that led these students to leave their programs.

Given the diverse population of students at the college where this study was completed, the results are limited to the unique identities included here and can't be generalized to other institutions. An additional limitation concerns the experiences of diverse students and how the components of diversity, e.g., race, sexuality, age, and ability, intersect with and inform the student experience. Potential barriers and support strategies that are tailored to diverse student experiences may not have been identified in this study, and warrant further study.

Finally, the purpose of this descriptive study was to expand our knowledge of the experiences of male ECE students in post-secondary classrooms in relation to enrolment and retention. To enhance the findings presented in this study, an expansion of the scope of research should be undertaken to include multiple institutions in the province. This larger sample size would provide a more detailed understanding of male ECE student experiences at the provincial level. Further, an expanded study would ideally include the perspectives of male students who do not complete their ECE programs, as this demographic was not included in this study. In addition, the strategies recommended in this study—where implemented—should be tracked to validate their potential success, or ineffectiveness, in recruiting and retaining male ECE students.

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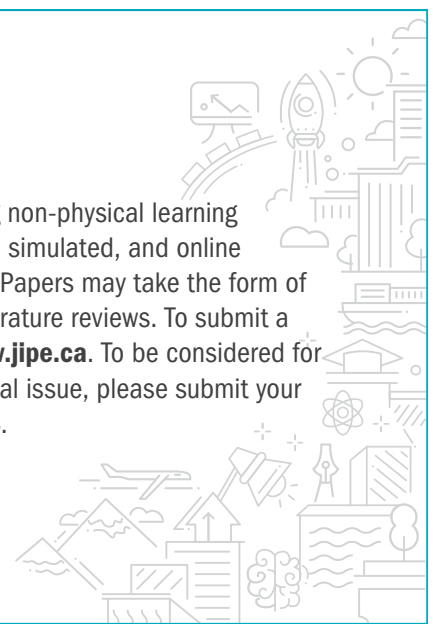
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Call for Papers

The Journal of Innovation in Polytechnic Education (JIPE) is pleased to announce a call for papers for a special issue of the journal, titled “**Innovative Learning Spaces**”. To truly support formal and informal learning that it is ubiquitous, educators need to reimagine the ways in which students engage with the curriculum. In this issue, we will feature the latest in innovative learning

space design, including non-physical learning spaces, such as virtual, simulated, and online learning environments. Papers may take the form of empirical studies or literature reviews. To submit a paper, please visit www.jipe.ca. To be considered for publication in the special issue, please submit your paper by **July 15, 2018**.



Appendix

Interview Protocol

Interview Protocol	
Title of study: <i>Male ECE Students in Post-secondary Classrooms: Enrolment and Retention</i>	
Date:	Location:
Time interview began:	Time interview ended:
Status as an ECE student: <input type="checkbox"/> Currently enrolled in the Humber ECE program <input type="checkbox"/> Left the Humber ECE program <input type="checkbox"/> Graduated from the Humber ECE program	
Interviewer:	Pseudonym:
<p>Introduce myself and discuss the study using the following script:</p> <p><i>“The purpose of this mixed methods study is to gain a deeper understanding of the low numbers of male ECE students at this College. Along with this and other interviews with male ECE students and graduates, anonymous enrolment and graduation data for male ECE students from 2008-2015 will be analyzed. The information that you have shared will be used to develop strategies for attracting male ECE students to the program and supporting them during their time at Humber. You are welcome to review and initial the notes taken during this interview and you can withdraw your participation at anytime without fear of reprisal. Your identity will be kept confidential as you will be given a pseudonym for all rough notes and working documents, and your real name and any identifying features will not be used in the written report. This interview is being recorded and is scheduled to last 15 minutes.”</i></p> <p>Refer back to the signed informed consent form, and ask if there are any questions before starting the interview. Next, test the recording device and then begin recording.</p> <p>Questions (<i>more space will be included after each question for interviews</i>):</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Please describe when, and for how long, you were an ECE student at Humber.2. What factors contributed to you applying for the ECE program at Humber?3. Were there any differences between your experiences in class and your experiences in field placement?4. What factors contributed to you successfully completing, or leaving, the ECE program at Humber?5. What suggestions would you have for Humber employees, e.g., faculty and field placement supervisors, to further support male ECE students?6. Is there anything else that you would like to add that hasn't been covered, or that you would like to expand upon? <p>Stop the recording. Thank the interviewee for participating in the study and restate that their identity will remain confidential.</p> <p>Gift card given to interviewee.</p>	