

“Dancing with Preschoolers Makes My Day”: A Male Educator’s Perspective on His Profession

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Abstract— Internationally, the profession of preschool educators is more dominated by females than males. Male educators in early childhood education (ECE) are very rare, however, the presence of male and female educators in ECE will be very meaningful in the balance of gender construction in early childhood. This study aims to explore the perceptions of a male teacher at ECE regarding his profession as an ECE teacher as well as a dance teacher. This research used a narrative qualitative approach, conducted in a kindergarten in Bandung that has a male teacher who also teaches dancing extracurriculars. Through the experiences and chronology of the teacher's career journey, the researcher tried to understand the reasons and factors that make the teacher in love and comfortable with his current profession, despite the fact about gender stereotypes in society. The teacher even preferred to continue his career at ECE even though he had been accepted by PPPK (Government Employee with Employment Agreement) at another educational unit (Junior High School). The results of this study indicate that from the male teacher's perspective: (1) working in an ECE environment with preschoolers is more dynamic that encourages creativity, (2) in line with his passion which increases his work engagement and well-being, and (3) there are opportunities for his self-development. Experiences and a supportive environment made a male teacher finally found his passion and chose to work at ECE.

Keywords: *early childhood education, gender construction, male teacher, dance teacher, passion*

I. INTRODUCTION

In many studies, it is stated that early childhood education is dominated by female teachers. Based on the Statistics of Early Childhood Education (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2022) the total number of female teachers in Early Childhood Education Institutions is 646.965 (94,61%) teachers, while the total number of male teachers is 36.852 (5,39%) teachers. The same thing also happens in educational institutions that generate educators for kindergarten or early childhood education (ECE). Research conducted by Haristi et al. (2015) showed that in terms of interest, women were more interested in becoming ECE teachers than men with a percentage of 8.87% from the total of 124 female students

and 4.92% out of 122 male students. After further review, the study also succeeded in finding the fact that one of the factors causing the low interest of men to become early childhood educators is due to the prevailing gender perception in Indonesian society where women are considered more appropriate in domestic majors (Rachman et al., 2022). This shows that even from the start, there are very few men who show a desire to become early childhood education teachers compared to women, so this also has an impact on the lack of male teachers in early childhood education (Gomes, 2008). This fact is also supported by the view or stigma in society that jobs as early childhood education or kindergarten teachers are more suitable for women, while men are more suitable for other, more masculine jobs (Putri et al., 2022). This assumption makes men feel insecure about becoming early childhood educators, thus affecting the very small number of male teachers in early childhood education and kindergarten settings. This is in line with the results of research by Maulana et al. (2020) which stated that the low presence of men in ECE was partly due to the negative views of society.

Sum and Talu (2018) reveal that in society's perception, women are considered more capable in educating and caring for children for two reasons, the first is because women are more patient in dealing with children. Second, it has always been the duty and obligation of women to give birth, educate and raise children, while men are tasked with earning a living (Sum & Talu, 2018; Yulindrasari, 2017). From this fact, it can be concluded that the roles of men and women in educating children are still closely related to culture. On the other hand, the presence of male teachers in early childhood education can strengthen gender identity as well as become role models for students, especially boys. Male students need to imitate the masculine roles of male teachers and female students need to imitate the feminine roles of male teachers. The existence of male and female teachers at the early childhood education level is very important in forming an appropriate and strong gender identity for each student (Al Baqi, 2021). Another research proved that the presence of male teachers had an impact on children. The children are less shy, less anxious, and less withdrawn (Besnard & Letarte, 2017). However, it is very unfortunate that in Indonesia, even in the world, the presence of male teachers in early childhood education is very rare (Maulana et al., 2020).

On the other hand, the existence of male educators in ECE is not completely refused (Yulindrasari, 2017) either from colleagues or parents and society. Research by Fadillah and Ngaisah (2023) on society perceptions of male teachers in ECE shows that some communities accept the existence of male teachers on the grounds that men can be an example of leadership for children and can also be facilitators for more various physical activities. Furthermore, when it is viewed from the usefulness and professional role, male teachers act as educators, school operators, school delegates, and also as role models as well as supervisors and protectors of children (Fikria et al., 2023). Another research showed that for some respondents when there are male teachers in their institutional units, they have their own characteristics in teaching, like being more creative than female teachers and more energetic, so that it raises children's interest in learning (Lusi et al., 2020). From these facts, then it can be concluded that perceptions on the presence of male teachers in ECE are currently changing.

Beside as a teacher, the respondent of this research also teaches dance as an extracurricular activity. It is undeniable that gender stereotypes are not only compared to male ECE educators but dancing for men as well (Christofidou, 2017), whereas these two things are more considered as female domain. In fact, not a few men were intimidated and experienced verbal harassment to physical injury (D'Augelli et al, 2002) because they were considered to have disobeyed the socially constructed notion of traditional masculinity in schools, the media, and society (Meyer, 2008).

However, there must be things that make men still choose to either work in ECE or dance. Risner (2014) in his research in dance education, stated that the status of boys in dance encounter outside, they internalized negativity, stereotypes, bias, and harassment are accepted as normal—expected, negotiated, and endured. Still, passion and perseverance remain their main message. In the ECE environment, dancing is an activity that has been almost always conducted, and obviously it's not only carried out by female students, but also male students. In this case, boys as learners in dance classes need male mentors and role models who affirm their masculine sense (Buck & Turpeinen, 2016), which shows that dancing is not only for girls.

Some previous studies focused on the perception of stakeholders (principals, colleagues, and parents), yet, there are only few studies discussing the male educators' perspective both in ECE environment and dance education. Therefore, based on these facts, this paper aims to explore more on the perspective of male teachers through his experiences, both in early childhood and dance education, as well as the factors that comfort him with his current profession.

II. METHODS

This research used narrative qualitative approach. According to Creswell, narrative research is used when we as researchers want to tell someone's story or experience and we want to report their story. Telling stories is a natural part of life, and all individuals have stories about their experiences that they share with others. (Creswell, 1998). Narrative research is a literal form of qualitative research with strong links and the literature provides a qualitative approach whereby we can write in a persuasive literary form, (McCarthy, 1994). Narrative research is a narrative report that tells a detailed sequence of events (Clandinin, 2000). This research was conducted in a kindergarten in Bandung which has a male as an assistant teacher in the class. In addition, the teacher is also a dance extracurricular teacher, as well as a school operator/administrator. In this narrative research design, the researcher wants to describe the life of individual, collect stories about life, and write stories about the experiences of a male teacher who teaches at ECE. This study will discuss stories that tell and explain events which is the researcher's center of attention based on a specific time sequence in detail.

The researcher built close relationship with the research subject, that is a male teacher (TN) who had taught for more than 20 years in a kindergarten in Bandung. In the beginning, the teacher only taught dance, because it was in line with his educational background, but as time went on, he also had to teach the children in class as a support teacher every day. The teacher is the only male teacher in the school where he works. The researcher wrote about TN's personal experiences while teaching at ECE until he ended up deciding to pursue his career at ECE, even though he had received an offer to teach at a public Junior High School as a Government Employee with Employment Agreement (PPPK).

As a typical form of qualitative research, this narrative research focuses on the study of a single person or individual and how that individual interprets the meaning of his experiences through the stories he tells. Data collection was carried out by collecting stories through interviews and discussing the meaning of the experiences for individuals. In this case, the researcher retells the story of TN's personal experiences focusing on his experiences while teaching at ECE and exploring these experiences, understanding them, and seeing how the experiences contribute to TN's present and future experiences.

The stories that the researcher got are retold, connected, and sequenced to be analyzed with the key elements of the story (time, place, plot, and scene). The researcher then rewrote the story in chronological order. In this case, while acquiring insights into TN's past, present, and future, the researcher analyzed and reported the chronology of the TN experience using the time sequence or chronology of events. Then in the next stage, the researcher collects stories about the figure of TN from his colleagues, understands them and rewrote them in a chronology of understanding using the researcher's own words.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The subject of this research (TN) has been working at an ECE in Bandung for more than twenty years, starting when he just graduated from Art High School and received an offer from a friend to teach dance extracurricular at ECE. Below is the chronology of TN's experiences as an ECE teacher which is retold and rewritten by the researcher.

Chronology of TN's experience as an ECE teacher for more than 20 years

After graduated from Art High School in 2002, TN received an offer from a friend to teach dance extracurricular activity at TK X Bandung. TN then started teaching dance at the school once a week on Saturdays. A year later, while still teaching kindergarten, TN continued his studies at The Education University of Indonesia in the same major, namely the Department of Dance Arts Education and graduated in 2008. Then in 2010, TN received his NUPTK (Unique Educator and Education Personnel Number) which required TN to teach classes 2-3 times a week, not only teaching dance but also teach in regular class as a supporting teacher together with the main teacher. In 2015, TN took part in PLPG (Teacher Professional Education and Training) to acquire competence and certificate as ECE teacher, subsequently TN began attending class every day as a supporting teacher until now. To increase his competence, TN attended various seminars and workshops on ECE. TN also actively asked for input from his co-workers and fortunately TN's co-workers gave a lot of advice and instruction to TN so he could teach well.

Apart from teaching kindergarten, TN also has given himself a try to have a career in elementary, junior high, and even high school. However, until now, TN has felt more comfortable teaching in ECE compared to other school units. Finally, in 2022, TN passed the selection and was accepted as a PPPK (Government Employee with Employment Agreement) at a public junior high school in Bandung, but TN decided not to take this opportunity. TN told that from his experience teaching in junior high school, he found it difficult to discipline the children who are usually uneasy to deal with because of their puberty. TN's decision was met with opposition from his family, especially his father. His father regretted TN's decision related to TN's competence which could actually have a career at a higher level and obviously related to a higher teaching fee. However, TN managed to convince his family that it was the best decision for him, because according to TN, the feel of comfort and happy are the most important things at work. Even though TN sometimes felt tired teaching young children, but at the same time, TN felt entertained and not burdened by the rigid teaching and learning process. TN considers that the learning process in ECE is more dynamic and fun, so that he can improve his creativity as a teacher.

TN's decision to continue his career in ECE was also influenced by his co-workers who were solid and provided positive vibes to one another. With over 20 years of service, in fact TN is a junior at the school. Some of TN's colleagues have even taught for more than 30 years. However, even though they are more senior, TN's colleagues are not necessarily arbitrary in their work. TN said that in terms of work, all workloads were divided equally and carried out together according to their respective competencies. They often share knowledge and help each other as well. Last but not least, they love humors which has created intimacy between colleagues. This positive environment was also one of TN's reasons to have pleasant heart working at the current school and will continue his career at ECE in the future.

Based on the data collected and analyzed by the researcher through stories from the subject and his colleagues, the following three themes emerged from this study which were the main reasons why the subject (TN) chose to continue his career at ECE even though he had the opportunity to have a career at another school as a Government Employee with Employment Agreement (PPPK):

1. Dynamic atmosphere that encourages creativity

In pursuing his career, TN has actually tried to have a career in elementary, junior high, and even high school, but he believes that the learning atmosphere experienced in class seems rigid, it is different with the atmosphere in ECE which is more dynamic when the teacher delivers the lessons. For example, when teaching letters or numbers, it doesn't have to be taught directly, but it can be delivered through songs or other activities that make children learn in a fun way. Here is TN's comment about this:

"Kalo menurut saya lebih dinamis gitu pembelajarannya, terus lebih.. Ga kaku gitu. Beda dengan anak SMA SMP gitu kan, di kelas yang ada. Kalo anak-anak, eee... memang ada silabusnya, ada ininya kan harus belajar ini, cuman kan saat di kelas kita tidak bisa memaksakan mereka harus bisa A, harus bisa B gitu. jadi kita belajarnya kalo misalnya kita belajar tentang huruf, belajar angka kan ga harus langsung kaya gini, gitu. nyanyi dulu atau dengan apa.."

(In my opinion, the learning is more dynamic, and it's more... not rigid like that. It's different from junior high school kids, right, in the existing class. For kids, um... there's a syllabus, you have to learn this, it's just that in class we can't force them to be able to do A, have to be able to do B like that. so we learn if for example we learn about letters, learning numbers doesn't have to be like this right away, like that. sing first or with what..)

The dynamic atmosphere which is meant by TN encourages teacher's creativity when delivering the lessons in class. Teachers don't always have to teach in the same way to teach the same things so that children are more interested and feel happy in learning. This is in line with the results of research by Setyawati, et al (2023) that learning that is carried out by teachers in a creative and innovative way will produce creative students as well. Creative teachers were characterised as being open-minded and accepting different views (Cheung, 2012). In this case, TN likes the learning method at ECE because it allows him to use various ways in teaching, one of the methods is singing with the children. So that the children can learn from the songs. In addition, TN also believes that learning environment at ECE tends to be more flexible but still has clear objectives in its implementation.

2. More in line with TN's passion which increasing his work engagement and work performance

The studies of what makes people happy, satisfied, fulfilled, and engaged at work has been the focus of many career counseling scholars and practitioners (Jawahar & Liu, 2017). Jawahar and Liu (2017) stated that work engagement is the main path to life satisfaction and happiness for proactive people. In terms of career development, one of the motivational factors that is underresearched is passion for work (Yukhymenko & Sharma, 2022). Some studies in different disciplines have demonstrated a positive relationship between working adults' passion for work and their positive affect (Pollack et al., 2020), a sense of purpose (Yukhymenko-Lescroart & Sharma, 2019), higher levels of work engagement (Curran et al., 2015), effective performance (Curran et al., 2015), intent to positively contribute to work organizations (Zigarmi et al., 2018), and personal well-being (Curran et al., 2015). Vallerand and Hourfort (2003) described a passion for work as people's desire to engage in work that they really love, value, and regard as an integral component of their identity. Working with passion is something that everyone pursues, because when someone has passion for work, then their work performance will increase and so will the job satisfaction as well as one's wellbeing.

Based on the interview with TN, he stated that working at ECE is more in line with his passion:

"Punten, maksudnya saya berkarir, udah nyoba SMP, SMA, SD... Ga ada yang cocok, malahan di PAUD yang cocok... eee... lebih suka anak-anak sih."

("Sorry, I mean I have had a career, I've tried junior high school, high school, elementary school.. they all don't fit me, surprisingly ECE fits me... um... I prefer young children anyway.")

Based on TN's statement, he had tried to teach at other educational units including ECE, but he ended up to felt fit in ECE where he prefers younger children to teach. It can be concluded that working with younger children or preschoolers is more suitable with TN's passion, which has been proved by him has been working at the kindergarten for more than 10 years. In addition, based on interviews

with his colleague, TN actually had the opportunity to teach at other schools as a Government Employee with Employment Agreement (PPPK), but TN chose to stay and work at ECE because he feels more comfortable working with young children. From his colleague, it is also stated that apart from being a teacher in class, TN also has competence in the IT field, which in turn makes him entrusted to be a school operator. These facts proved that when an individual feels comfortable and works for a passion, his work engagement increases along with his work performance. This is supported by research conducted by Curran et al. (2015) which shows that passion for work is characterized by people's inclination to invest a significant amount of time and effort into their work, enhances people's work engagement, and further contributes to their work performance and overall sense of well-being.

3. Opportunities for self-development

The quality of teaching competence is important in creating and establishing the quality of the student learning process, and at the same time demonstrating the level of professionalism of teachers according to their fields and can contribute to improving learning performance (Hakim, 2015). TN believes that while working at the current ECE, he has the opportunity to develop himself professionally, that is by continuing his education to the Bachelor's level with the same major, Dance Arts Education. Then, as time went on, it turned out that he also had the opportunity to teach in class as a supporting teacher several times a week, and until now he has to teach in class every day. The dance extracurricular activity is held every Friday for all levels in the school. To be able to teach more professionally, TN then participated in PPG (Teacher Professional Education) program, various seminars, training, and workshops on early childhood education. This is also supported by the school that facilitates and encourages TN to be able to teach more professionally. Here is TN's comment on this matter:

"Iya, SMK Kesenian jurusan seni tari. Dulunya sih disini sebenarnya, ngajarnya ngajar... sebenarnya sih saya lebih ke ngajar seni tari, seni apa ekskul seni tari.. Eeee baru masuk UPI, jurusan seni tari. nah terus, tahun.. sekitar tahun 2010 mungkin ya,, eee semua guru diwajibkan masuk kelas. jadi guru yang terdaftar di dinas lah ya, diwajibkan masuk kelas. nah mulai saat itu saya mulai apa ya, bahasa sundanya, klo bahasa Indonesia nya mah, mulai pemanasan gitu ya masuk kelas beberapa kali seminggu nah sekarang udah setiap hari."

("Yes, Arts High School majoring in Dance. Previously, I actually taught here, actually taught... actually, I was more into teaching dance, art or extracurricular dance.. Eeee, I then entered UPI, majoring in dance. well then, year.. around 2010 maybe,, eee all teachers are required to attend class. so teachers who are registered in *Dinas*, are required to enter class. So, from then on, I start to, in Sundanese... in Bahasa Indonesia, I started warming up, so I taught in class several times a week, now it's every day.")

"Eee PAUD nya saya belajar dari pengalaman di lapangan dan juga kemaren PLPG kan PPG,, nah saya disitu ilmu ke PAUD-an nya. Sama dari seminar-seminar apa kaya gitu, jadi gitu untuk ilmu ke PAUD an nya"

("Ummm.. for the knowledge about ECE, I learned from my experiences in the class and also by joining PLPG, PPG, well, I learned about early childhood education there. And I also participating in several seminars or something like that, so that's it for my ECE knowledge.")

From TN's comments and also his colleagues' statements, it is implied that at the beginning TN only taught dance activity at the kindergarten, but then he had been accepted and given chance to develop himself as a fulltime teacher at the school. The principal also stated that TN has been accepted as permanent employee of the foundation of the school because of his willingness to do his best on his current job and also his capability. Furthermore, it turned out that TN also has skill in IT which allows him to be the school operator now.

Despite of the gender stereotypes about ECE teachers existing in society, TN's presence as a male teacher at ECE may seem uncommon at first. TN was the only male ECE teacher in the entire sub-district. However, it was not uncommon for other schools (kindergarten) to ask the school where TN taught to handle major activities between schools in the sub-district because they saw TN's presence and performance. TN became the person who the ECE teachers relied on, who were mostly females at that time. Other teachers and the community really appreciate TN and the school where TN works, for being a pioneer of male ECE teacher. Consequently, at the moment, there are already a few male ECE teachers in the sub-district and TN is still their mainstay when they need help, especially in the field of dance. It is indeed, the presence of male teacher in ECE has brought its own uniqueness to the school and society (Lusi et al., 2020).

Pointing at teacher wellbeing, the principal stated that all teachers have the same rights and obligations from the Foundation because the school is a private school. The school principal also confirmed that there is no difference in treating male and female teachers at school. All teachers are treated the same and receive compensation based on their respective performance. Since TN does not only serve as teacher, but also as school operator, obviously TN gets additional allowances for this position. Therefore, the judgement that the profession as ECE teacher tends to be underpaid (Maulana et al., 2020) does not have a significant effect on TN, because the school where TN works provides reasonable wages for the employees.

In pursuing his career, TN absolutely cannot avoid problems, which are mostly related to parents-usually mothers. The support of colleagues, especially the school principal plays an important role for TN. The school principal stated that TN has extraordinary abilities, so she always gives her full support and accompanies TN when dealing with mothers demanding all their children to appear and dance in school art events. The principal then, explains that not all children could appear in the event, it is the teacher who has the right to choose, because the teacher knows the abilities and readiness of each child.

The principal's perception on gender related to male ECE teachers also influenced her decision to hire TN. The principal believes that the gender ideology regarding men who become ECE teachers in society have begun to erode away. She also believes that the existence of TN in the school she leads is something that is in line with TN's expertise and there is a sense of pride when her school becomes a pioneer in this matter. The same thing was shown in research by Yulindrasari (2017), the understanding on gender as a social construction in society and culture has led a female school principal to employ seven male teachers in her school.

IV. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The current scarcity of male ECE teachers is still very closely related to gender stereotypes and perceptions in society, such as women's domain and low status job (Joseph & Wright, 2016), resulting in men shy and unwilling to become ECE teachers. However, in fact, some the presence of male teachers at ECE is considered to bring various advantages, such as strengthening students' gender identity and bringing its own uniqueness in the student learning process. Apart from these things, it turns out that there are also things that make a male teacher more comfortable and choose to continue his career at ECE despite having the opportunity to teach at another school unit. Some of the reasons given by the teacher were that working with young children is more dynamic so that it encourages

teacher's creativity, it is more in line with his passions so that increasing the work engagement and work performance as well, and also the work environment supports his self-development and abilities.

Some recommendations regarding this research are:

1. There is a need of support from the government and the ministry of education in addressing the issue regarding the scarcity of male ECE teachers in Indonesia.
2. It is expected that principals, other ECE authorities, and also parents have strategies to involve more males in early childhood education.
3. For further research, it is necessary to compare the perceptions of male teachers in other ECEs on the similar matter

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