

Addressing the Underrepresentation of Men in Early Childhood Education: Perspectives, Barriers, and Instructional Design Solutions

Oluwole Caleb Falode

Oluwole Caleb Falode is a researcher, education practitioner, and trainer with over ten years of postdoctoral experience. He works full time as the coordinator of the Saskatoon Early Years Family Resource Centre (SEYFRC, West) and part time as an instructional design specialist at Saskatchewan Polytechnic, Canada. He was previously a sessional lecturer at the University of Saskatchewan and a lecturer / senior lecturer at the Federal University of Technology, Minna, Nigeria. He holds bachelor's, master's, and doctorate degrees in educational technology, as well as a certification in early childhood education. He has authored over 65 peer-reviewed publications in the field of education. Email: falodeo@saskpolytech.ca

Addressing the underrepresentation of male early childhood educators is crucial due to their role in fostering children's holistic development. Male educators provide unique perspectives and serve as role models in a gender-sensitive environment. This study builds on existing research through a literature review and semistructured interviews with a global sample of ECE practitioners and students. Findings reveal that social, psychological, and economic barriers contribute to the gender imbalance. Raising awareness about men's positive impact in ECE and creating incentives for male educators are essential. Inclusive instructional designs in ECE programs can encourage gender diversity and support balanced development for young learners.

Key words: early childhood, gender balance, instructional design, child development

The roles of both male and female early childhood educators are crucial to a child's holistic development, but globally, there is an imbalanced and unequal number of male and female educators in early childhood education (ECE). The imbalance is a fundamental issue in many countries. The concerning trend is the predominance of women in the ECE workforce worldwide. While education policies in Sweden have emphasized the inclusion of male teachers in ECE, leading to a tremendous rise from 6% to 18% of the ECE workforce between 2003 and 2009 (Wu, 2023), research indicates that men represent only 2% of the ECE workforce worldwide, while women comprise the remaining 98% (Mofokeng, 2024; Mulaudzi & Ravhutulu, 2024; Reich-Shapiro et al., 2020; Roberts, 2021; Rohrmann, 2016, 2020; Sullivan et al., 2020; Whitebook et al., 2016). In Ontario, Canada, male educators account for only 1% of the ECE workforce (Bonnett & Wade, 2022). Despite efforts to increase the number of

male educators in ECE over the past decade, a report provided by UNESCO (2021) reveals that males still account for less than 3% of the global ECE workforce. Thus, even though the numbers of male teachers have increased in the past decade, early childhood educators are still overwhelmingly female.

Gender can be viewed from both biological and sociological perspectives. Based on a biological perspective, gender involves males and females having an XY and XX chromosomal makeup respectively; from a sociological perspective, gender is socially constructed and adaptable according to temporal, cultural, and social factors (Bonnett & Wade, 2022). This study takes the biological perspective; the terms *man* and *male* refer to humans with XY chromosomal makeup, and *woman* and *female* refer to humans with XX chromosomal makeup.

Traditional gender stereotypes shape expectations in various areas, including household roles and career choices. While much attention has been given to the stereotypes women face, with numerous advocacy groups and human rights organizations working to ensure that women are heard and treated fairly, it is equally important to recognize that men also encounter stereotypes. These stereotypes are particularly prevalent in professions related to caregiving,

which tend to be female dominated. One such profession is ECE, where men often face skepticism. Research has explored the challenges men encounter in this field, as well as their motivations to remain in the profession despite these stereotypes (Flint, 2022; Levy, 2024). Gender stereotypes and familial and societal expectations may hinder some men from becoming early childhood educators because the ECE field is considered a female field. The activities in ECE usually involve teaching subjects such as literacy and numeracy, singing rhymes and poems, playing with the children, cleaning, assisting children with meals, toileting, and settling down for sleep, among others. Males and females are seen to have different innate capacities. Females are seen as more emotional beings who can easily show tender care for others due to their femininity. Also, working in ECE is associated with mothering, and caring for children is seen by many to be an innately feminine activity. Therefore, females are more likely than males to select care-based occupations, and employers show a preference for employing females in these roles (Sullivan et al., 2020).

In many communities, men are expected to direct their strength into tasks perceived as physically demanding, while childcare is viewed as primarily nurturing and therefore less task intensive. This perspective fails to recognize that effective early childhood education requires substantial planning and delivery, both of which demand significant skill and expertise. Furthermore, early childhood education is often regarded as a feminine profession, with masculinity being associated with roles in professions considered more physically demanding or practical (Çiğ, 2023). In many societies, high-paying jobs are typically linked to tasks that require physical strength, creating a disparity in the remuneration of jobs perceived as less physically demanding, such as early childhood education. Additionally, societal expectations often place men in the role of primary financial providers for their families, which can discourage them from pursuing careers in early childhood education. This societal view can deter men from considering a profession that is intellectually challenging and crucial to the development of future generations.

While many men express interest in working in ECE, cultural perceptions often discourage them, particularly mistrust surrounding their interactions with children. Due to their perceived masculinity, male early childhood educators are often delegated tasks involving physical activities, and since children tend to be active, physical contact can occur between the male educator and the learner which may be regarded with suspicion. When a female educator engages in physical activities with children, there is limited supervision and monitoring of the activities, but when the educator is male, scrutiny and suspicion heighten, particularly when they interact with female children. Moosa and Bhana's (2019) study found that some men avoid the ECE profession out of fear of being perceived as initiators of inappropriate behaviour. Similar fears on the part of centre management may contribute to male educators being prevented from participating in some activities with children such as cuddling, changing nappies, and toileting (Wilkinson & Warin, 2022). Some studies indicate that the presence of queer and trans men in early childhood education may disrupt prevailing stereotypes about men's behaviour with children (Bower-Phipps, 2020; Hooker, 2018).

Studies have shown a strong relationship between low pay and the reluctance of men to enter the preschool workforce (Wu, 2023). In many countries, poor compensation for early childhood educators, including low wages and insufficient incentives, is a common issue (Quinones et al., 2021). Early childhood educators' salaries are £1000 less than those of school teacher, even though the workload is similar (Wu, 2023). This issue is further compounded in regions where men are expected to be the primary or sole financial providers for their families. When the pay from early childhood education is inadequate to sustain a household, men are less likely to pursue a career in the field, opting instead for professions that offer higher pay and better incentives (Liu et al., 2025). Based on the author's prior professional experience, early childhood education has at times been treated as a profit-oriented enterprise, with some school administrators prioritizing financial gain over educators' welfare.

In my experience, male early childhood educators experience more occupational dissatisfaction than their female colleagues, resulting in burnout. Consistent with this, Bonnett and Wade (2022) asserted that male early childhood educators experience negative physical, psychological, and occupational symptoms of burnout which are associated with increased risk of heart disease, respiratory problems, insomnia, depression, and medical leave which are more routine for males than for their female counterparts. Many societies also view early childhood education as merely a caretaking task (Gibbons, 2020; Zhang et al., 2019), overlooking its essential role in fostering a child's holistic development. As a result, male teachers, educators, and candidates often face questions about their career choices due to gender stereotypes and cultural expectations. Brody and Ziv (2020) found that the greatest challenge male early childhood educators face in the profession is the gender-based perceptions regarding the roles of men in the field. To protect their image and avoid being stereotyped as unfit for demanding professions, some well-trained and passionate men abandon early childhood education in favour of careers perceived as more suitable for men, leaving the field predominantly to women despite their potential contributions. Roberts (2021) found that the men currently working as early childhood educators are strongly motivated to remain in the field due to their deep commitment to the children in their care. The role of men in early childhood education and care is essential for shaping a future where children grow up in a gender sensitive-world. Male educators not only serve as important role models but also help balance child training, guiding children in channeling their energy appropriately. By bringing diverse perspectives and teaching styles to child development, male educators complement the contributions of female educators. However, Roberts (2021) cautioned that societal perceptions of men in the field often remain entrenched in the belief that they are performing "women's work." This limited view overlooks the valuable contributions men can make, as they should instead be recognized as significant role models and essential contributors to the profession. Understanding these dynamics has critical implications for instructional design, as it calls for a more inclusive approach that values the diversity of educators and fosters an environment supporting both male and female involvement in early childhood education. The importance of including male educators in early childhood education cannot be overemphasized. The non-involvement of male educators in ECE can hamper children's psycho-social and educational development and create a gap in the momentum of success gained through fathers' involvement in early childhood (Ramolula & Mokhele-Makhalwa, 2023).

Instructional design in early childhood education (ECE) plays a critical role in developing inclusive, engaging, and effective learning environments that support gender diversity and equity. By creating structured, gender-neutral, and appealing curricula, instructional design fosters diversity in teaching styles and caregiving approaches. Furthermore, it provides educators with strategies to integrate awareness-raising components into ECE curricula to address and reduce gender biases among current and future educators. Instructional design in ECE is thus essential, as it not only enhances the learning experience for children but also promotes gender balance within the teaching profession.

This article addresses the need for gender balance in early childhood education from two perspectives. The first involves designing instructional content that appeals to male candidates pursuing ECE careers. Interactive activities suitable for men studying ECE and those practicing in early childhood settings can be tailored to engage male learners effectively. Such strategies promote inclusivity and reduce discrimination, fostering a welcoming environment for all educators (Mariam & Nam, 2019). The curriculum for ECE programs can also be crafted to attract more men to the field. Wu and Li (2024) emphasize that educational institutions can optimize curriculum design to align with students' career needs, supporting their success and satisfaction as early childhood educators. To encourage men to enter and thrive in the profession, even when working predominantly with women, programs should incorporate elements specifically aimed at addressing and supporting men's unique experiences and needs. By crafting materials and interactive content that male students find engaging, institutions can encourage greater

enrollment of men in ECE programs at colleges and universities. Increased male enrollment is crucial for achieving gender balance in the field, as it expands the representation of male educators in early childhood settings. Without more men entering the field, achieving gender equity in ECE remains challenging, limiting the diversity of role models available to young learners.

The second perspective addresses societal perceptions that consider women as naturally more suited to caregiving and early childhood development due to perceived strengths in patience and creativity with crafts and activities. Instructional design can help shift these perceptions by creating activities that men find fulfilling and relevant. Such activities can leverage the unique strengths and characteristics of male educators, empowering them to feel more active and comfortable in ECE roles. Instructional design must not only address the cognitive development of young children but also create an environment that encourages creativity and active participation (Mariam & Nam, 2019). Male educators can use their unique creativity to design engaging environments that actively encourage children's participation. Male educators involved in ECE provide children with diverse role models, enhancing young learners' understanding of collaboration, equity, and varied approaches to learning and teaching. For instance, physical activity and fitness are essential for the development of preschool-aged children, as this stage represents a critical period for establishing healthy behaviours that can last a lifetime (Sujarwo et al., 2024). Men play a crucial role in promoting physical development, and instructional design should leverage their strengths and interests. By recognizing and incorporating the unique contributions of male early childhood educators, instructional strategies can better engage both male educators and children in physical activities. Gender-balanced ECE environments foster rich perspectives, enabling children to grow in an environment that values diversity in caregiving and educational practices.

Although existing literature has emphasized the importance of male educators in ECE and identified perceived reasons for their underrepresentation, there has been a gap in understanding the full range of factors influencing men's participation in ECE. This study addressed this gap by gathering insights directly from ECE practitioners and students across various countries. By combining perspectives from a diverse pool of respondents, including those in preschools and resource centres, the research offers a comprehensive view of the barriers men face in entering and remaining in ECE.

This study also extends previous research by examining the instructional design implications of its findings. It focused on developing interactive, gender-neutral content within ECE training programs that appeals to male students, encouraging more men to pursue ECE careers. Additionally, the study explored the creation of activities that practicing male educators find rewarding to carry out with children, which enhances children's play, learning, and development processes. Since no prior research has specifically linked these instructional design strategies to increasing male representation in ECE, this study addresses a critical gap and contributes actionable insights to promote gender diversity in ECE.

Social role theory

Social role theory is a sociological framework that examines how societal expectations about gender roles shape individuals' aspirations, and career choices (Mulaudzi & Ravhutulu, 2024). The theory posits that cultural norms dictate what is appropriate for men and women in various social and professional contexts. Relating the theory to this study, social role theory explains why caregiving and nurturing roles are traditionally associated with women while men are often relegated to roles requiring authority or discipline. These gendered expectations create barriers for men considering careers in ECE as teaching and caring for young pupils is perceived as being compatible with traditional notions of femininity. The theory helps explain the low representation of male educators in the ECE

field by examining how societal norms hinder men from pursuing careers in early childhood education. This study used social role theory to examine the perceived roles of male and female educators in education by considering the reasons male teachers are often assigned tasks aligned with stereotypically masculine traits, such as discipline and administrative duties, rather than relational or caregiving responsibilities. Addressing these societal expectations about gender roles can reshape cultural norms and promote early childhood teaching as a viable career for men.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research approach to examine the factors contributing to the underrepresentation of men in ECE. A comprehensive literature review was conducted to establish a foundation of existing knowledge regarding male representation within the ECE field. Following this, semistructured interviews were conducted with current ECE practitioners and students pursuing diplomas or bachelor's degrees in ECE. These interviews provide firsthand perspectives on the observed gender imbalance in the field.

Participants

A purposive sampling method was used to recruit 20 participants from nine countries, ensuring a diverse range of cultural contexts and perspectives. The participant pool comprised both current students enrolled in ECE programs at colleges and universities and professionals employed in childcare centres, family resource centres, and preschools. Participants were selected from a diverse international range, including North America (2 from the USA, 4 from Canada), South America (1 from Jamaica), Europe (3 from the United Kingdom), Africa (2 from Ghana, 4 from Nigeria, 1 from South Africa), and Asia (1 from South Korea, 1 from Bangladesh, and 2 from India). Participants selected for the study were aged 22 to 50 years and included both male and female individuals.

Interviews were conducted using a semistructured format, which allowed participants to share insights regarding male representation in ECE and their personal views on the underrepresentation of men in the field. The interviews were conducted at various times and in multiple formats to accommodate participants' availability and preferences, including one-on-one discussions either in person, via phone, or through written responses submitted via email.

Data analysis

The data collected from the interviews was transcribed, where necessary, and analyzed using thematic analysis to identify patterns and recurring themes in participants' perspectives. Responses were systematically collated and organized by grouping similar explanations and viewpoints. These grouped responses were then synthesized into thematic categories, each summarizing key insights related to the factors contributing to the underrepresentation of men in ECE. This approach facilitated a comprehensive presentation of the findings, ensuring that participants' views on the issue were accurately represented and meaningfully captured.

Ethical considerations

This study adhered to ethical research standards, ensuring participant confidentiality and informed consent. Participant anonymity was maintained, and no identifiable information was disclosed in the analysis or reporting of findings. Artificial intelligence was not used in any aspect of the work.

Findings

The underrepresentation of men in ECE appears to stem from a complex mix of financial, social, psychological factors, as reported by interviewees from diverse backgrounds. Under the category of financial factors, most

participants reported that the pay of male early childhood educators is insufficient to sustain their family. They also pointed out that the pay for more labour-intensive jobs is better than that of ECE staff. Extracts from the respondent interviews include the following:

Salaries of preschool educators are not substantial enough to cater for the needs of a family. ... We don't even receive any welfare package and benefits. (Participant A)

The remunerations from early childhood education professions cannot pay family bills. (Participant F)

The take home as an early childhood education teacher is low and small. I have three kids, and the pay is barely enough for feeding. (Participant J)

Men earn higher in more labour intensive jobs than as early childhood education teachers. (Participant N)

In Nigeria, more financial responsibilities is expected from the man of the house. A woman can cope with the salaries gotten from working with early childhood education since they have only few or no financial responsibility, but for a man the salary will not be enough to take care of the needs of his family. (Participant D)

The pay is too low for me and my family's financial needs. I receive less than a hundred thousand naira as an early childhood educator, and it is not enough to cater for my needs and that of my family. (Participant H)

From the above, a primary factor responsible for the inequality of male and female workforce in ECE is the financial factor. This is in line with the findings of Ramolula and Mokhele-Makhalwa (2023), Wu (2023), and Mulaudzi and Ravhutulu (2024), whose studies showed that low salaries of preschool teachers are a constraint and a factor that leads to a lower number of male kindergarten teachers. The men also perceived that they can earn higher wages in labour-intensive fields traditionally dominated by men. These labour-intensive fields offer greater financial incentives that would allow them to meet the financial needs and expectations of their families.

As regards psychological factors, the cultural notion that masculinity is related to muscular strength plays a significant role in some societies, which affects males' mentality and makes them drawn to professions that emphasize physical work and competitiveness. Societal expectations further reinforce perceptions of men and women, as caregiving has historically been seen as a feminine responsibility. Consequently, working with young children is still socially coded as "women's work," creating additional barriers to male involvement in ECE. The ECE field also lacks the competitive environment associated with some male-dominated professions, leading some men to feel out of place or even inferior in the ECE field. Responses from some participants included the following:

We live in a patriarchal society where men are believed to be in authority, and would take jobs where they can exercise their authority. (Participant C)

Most men are called out for more fulfilling job roles and labour-intensive jobs such as engineering. (Participant F)

While women are compassionate, men lack the patience to handle young children. (Participant D)

Men need jobs where they can exercise their muscular strength, so we find labour-intensive jobs fulfilling. (Participant I)

Society attributes early childhood education teaching to weak men. (Participant E)

Male early childhood education teachers are often mocked by friends and family members. (Participant P)

Most women are naturally home care takers. ... They are considered more suitable for the job than the male. (Participant H)

Men don't have sufficient mentors and role models in the field of early childhood education as they do other fields. (Participant G)

Men don't get enough competition and challenges in the workforce from other male colleagues. (Participant L)

Some people really don't understand what it involved. They think it's not a real job, that it entails just playing with children and as such should be a female job. (Participant A)

Men don't have the natural inner ability to cater for young children. (Participant B)

It is considered a female job. (Participant K)

Early childhood education jobs are very demanding and require multitasking. (Participant I)

Females are considered suitable for the jobs. (Participant M)

The task involved in the job is too demanding for males when compared to the pay involved. (Participant J)

The quotes above reveal that the societal perception of appropriate jobs for men and women is a constraint that leads to a lower number of male educators than female educators. The participants indicated that the job of early childhood educator is believed to be appropriate for females because it involves caring for children, and jobs such as engineering are perceived to be appropriate for males. This finding is consistent with that of Mulaudzi and Ravhutulu (2024), whose study revealed that perceptions of roles and responsibilities combined with limited professional development opportunities make early childhood education an unattractive career choice for men. ECE does not deliver on male career aspirations (McDonald et al., 2024). The nurturing, patient, and creative qualities required for ECE work may be seen as socially devalued for men, or these traits are seen to be less prevalent in men, based on personal or cultural expectations. This finding correlates with those of Wu (2023), who reported that "low social status of preschool teachers, heavy workloads and traditional social attitudes are constraints and factors that lead to a lower number of male kindergarten teachers than female teachers" (p. 43). In a related vein, Mulaudzi and Ravhutulu (2024) revealed that in South Africa, cultural stereotypes and gender norms attributed caregiving to women, which hindered male participation in early childhood education. Across cultures, there is a significant misunderstanding about the role of ECE professionals, with many people viewing it as mere babysitting. This misconception likely contributes to the low number of male educators in the field. In Nigeria, caretaking is often stereotyped as a "female" job, and early childhood education is not valued as highly as schooling for older children. In Israel, ECE is viewed as a "second motherhood" job, which has resulted in social stereotypes and prejudices that continue to see teaching as specifically feminine work and demeaning the work of professional ECE teachers (Ziv, 2015). Also, in Germany, ECE is stereotyped as a "feminized work force," which connotes particular attitudes and behavioral styles that are linked to gender stereotypes of the profession (Rohrmann, 2016). In a study in the USA, a teacher participant said that "parents held gender stereotypes regarding male ECE teachers" (Douglas, 2021). In South Africa, societal stereotypes often influence ECE male educators' perception as men are seen as "disciplinarians rather than nurturers" and are expected to take on "authoritative roles rather than caregiving responsibilities" (Mulaudzi & Ravhutulu, 2024). Similarly, in a study in Czechia, Haines et al. (2025)

affirmed that female ECE workers were held to a higher standard than their male counterparts, with the profession viewed as “less ideal” for males. As a result, ECE educators are sometimes seen not as teachers but as caregivers providing temporary care while parents work.

Participants also reported encountering insecurity, mistrust, and suspicion about the activities of male early childhood educators with young children.

Both the male and female pupils like me and my interaction with them, but their parents don't trust the welfare of their female children to male educators as they do with female educators. (Participant I)

Parents and school authorities always suspect and closely monitor the activities of male educators with female children. (Participant D)

Mistrust and suspicion from parents. ... They question early childhood education male teachers' motives and moves when working with young children. (Participant H)

Some daycare, kindergarten, creche, nursery, preschool proprietors, administrators, and directors outrightly refuse to employ male educators. ... Males cannot take care of young children. (Participant L)

Some school administrators find it difficult to employ males for daycare, kindergarten, creche. ... They always note that “some parents are not satisfied and comfortable with male educators taking care of young children. (Participant G)

These quotes from interviewees align with the findings of Rohrmann (2016), who stated that suspicion of school administrators and parents against male ECE workers as potential pedophiles and sexual abusers remains a global challenge. Studies by Mofokeng (2024) and McDonald et al. (2024) also found that male teachers were not being trusted to assist children. Concerns over potential stigmatization and unfounded associations with abuse deter some men from entering or remaining in the ECE field. The nurturing, patient, and creative qualities required for ECE work may be seen as socially devalued for men, or school administrators, directors, and owners might feel these traits are less prevalent in men. This finding is consistent with that of Mulaudzi and Ravhutulu (2024), whose study revealed that parental mistrust hinders male participation in early childhood education. Shifting the perception of ECE from caretaking to education would help the public recognize ECE professionals as providers of foundational education rather than babysitters. This understanding could encourage more men to consider careers in ECE, promoting greater gender balance and equality in the field for the overall development of young children.

Despite these challenges, some men are drawn to ECE out of strong values related to family and child development, often shaped by their own experiences as fathers. This finding agrees with that of Bonnett and Wade (2022) and Mofokeng (2024), whose studies revealed that males were satisfied, capable, and passionate about teaching in ECE since they were seen as role models and they played the role of loving fathers in ECE. Yet, these cases remain uncommon due to societal pressures that traditionally steer men away from caregiving roles.

Conclusion

The findings from the literature and responses from the participants in this study confirm the underrepresentation of men in early childhood education and the barriers to their participation in the field. For men to contribute meaningfully to and complement the roles of women in child development, their representation needs to be increased. While the role of women in early childhood development cannot be underestimated, certain attributes of men can positively impact children due to their unique nature. Instructional design in the curriculum for ECE candidates, as well as the curriculum for play and learning in ECE, could help bridge the gender inclusivity gap if

specific attention is given to encourage male participation.

Recommendations

The following recommendations, if implemented, will not only improve inclusivity in the ECE field but also enhance the learning environment for children by providing them with diverse role models.

1. Governments, agencies, organizations, and other stakeholders should raise awareness about the positive impact of men's involvement in early childhood education. While women are excelling in this field, men can bring unique behaviours and perspectives that complement women's efforts, serving as positive role models for children. The campaign should emphasize the importance of diversity in caregiving roles and showcase male role models in ECE to inspire more men to join the field.
2. Governments and employers should offer incentives, such as financial bonuses, promotions, and sponsorships to attend professional events, to retain the few men already working in early childhood education and sustain the interest of the women in the field. Additionally, scholarships or bursaries should be provided to those currently studying or considering a career in early childhood education, helping to attract more men to this profession. Financial assistance, including grants, scholarships, and loans, would address some of the financial barriers that deter men from entering the field. By offering adequate funding and support, we can encourage more men to pursue careers in early childhood education.
3. Early childhood and family resource centres, as well as elementary schools, should improve their policies to support male educators with families by offering flexible hours and enhanced paternity leave options. Efforts should also be made to recruit men with ECE qualifications to create balanced gender representation, promote male engagement in diverse caregiving roles, and establish leadership positions that appeal to male educators. These initiatives could encourage more men to join the field.
4. Employers, educational institutions, and professional organizations should collaborate actively to reduce gender bias against men in caregiving roles. Gender sensitivity training should be provided to families and the wider community to address stereotypes and emphasize the educational benefits of male educators rather than perceived risks. It is essential to foster supportive workplaces in childcare centres and schools, promoting understanding that safeguarding practices protect all children, not only from male caregivers. These efforts can help create inclusive environments that encourage more men to pursue ECE careers.
5. Support networks and mentorship programs should be established to connect young male practitioners and male students in the field with experienced male mentors. Through these connections, men can gain confidence, learn how others have overcome similar challenges, and find the strength to succeed. Additionally, they will understand that they are not alone as men in the field, fostering a sense of community and shared purpose.
6. Instructional design in ECE programs should be inclusive, incorporating content that appeals to men and equips them to develop patience, handle psychological aspects, and engage in practical activities. Crafting and creative activities for children should be designed in ways that are particularly engaging for men. Including these elements in the curriculum for all ECE candidates can help foster men's interest in the field and address perceived barriers related to gender.

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