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Gender Effects on the Choice of Education as a Field of Study:

The Perceptions of Female Students

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Introduction

In education, several studies have attempted to examine the factors influencing the choice of teaching as a career. The over-representation of women in the teacher population is considered a cause for concern in many countries, with policy makers aiming at an increase in the numbers of male teachers. For instance, in England and Wales, the low number of male teachers is considered to have negative effect on the performance of students.^{1,2} However, the

‘feminisation’ of education does not appear to extend to leadership positions in the educational system. Even though women constitute the majority of teachers in the teacher population in many countries, they are often under-represented in leadership posts.^{3,4} The marginalisation of women in educational leadership has been linked to a deficit in their career aspirations, which are formed before entry into higher education.

Research evidence points to the sizable effect of gender on career aspirations.^{5,6} Men are reported to aim at higher qualifications and higher posts than women, who are content with a secure job offering stability in terms of employment and working conditions. As a result, women often choose fields of study that are less competitive and demanding, and more in line with societal stereotypes for their gender. Consequently, boys are over-represented in science and technology, while women limit their aspirations to the humanities and social sciences. The deficit in the aspirations of women has a negative impact on their career prospects in that they stay away from fields that offer the highest returns in the labour market.

The present study aims at investigating the effects of gender on the career aspirations and expectations of female students in Cyprus, through an exploration of the factors influencing the choice of Education as a field of study. Specifically, the study examines the perceptions of female students of the Education Department of the University of Cyprus, regarding the effect of gender, as well as other factors, on their decision to choose Education (primary or pre-primary) as a field of study. The perceived effect of gender on the students’ future career progression is also examined. Cyprus is considered to constitute an interesting case for research, in that the majority of both primary and secondary education teachers are women. In 2010, about 80% of primary school teachers and 99.9% of pre-primary school teachers were women.⁷ In this context, the present study attempts to investigate the extent to which female students of the Education

Department of the University of Cyprus consider their gender to have played a role in the choice of a field of study, and expect their gender to have an effect on their career progression.

Methodology

Qualitative data were collected in order to investigate the views of female students regarding the role of gender and social factors in educational and career choices of women in Cyprus. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a total of 10 students, of whom seven were studying Primary Education and three Pre-primary Education at the Department of Education of the University of Cyprus. First year students were excluded because they were considered less likely to be able to assess their satisfaction with the chosen field of study. For the same reason, more fourth year students were selected for interviewing.

In the interviews, respondents were asked to answer 6 open-ended questions, which related to their views regarding the role of gender and social variables on the choice of Education as a field of study. In the first question, respondents were asked to discuss the reasons for the choice of Education as a field of study. No specific reasons were suggested to respondents in order to allow them to express their views without the presence of bias. The second question concerned the degree to which societal expectations and trends had influenced the choice of respondents, while in the third question respondents were asked to focus on the family as a source of influence. In the fourth question, respondents were asked to discuss the degree to which their gender had influenced the choice of a field of study in higher education. The fifth question also focused on the effects of gender but was indirect, in that it asked respondents to discuss the effects of gender not in their case but in general. Asking the question in the third person enables respondents to avoid personalisation and express their views more freely. This type of projective

technique is necessary in the case of sensitive topics, where interviewees may not want to admit to certain patterns of decision making and/or behaviour, which may, in their opinion, reveal their weaknesses. Finally, question 6 referred to the degree to which respondents expected their gender to have an effect on their career (defined as progression and development in the workplace).

As regards analytical methods, the data were subjected to Content Analysis. All interviews were transcribed for the purposes of the analysis. After the transcription of interviews, the collected data were analysed through the constant comparative method where theory generation is grounded, with the data leading to the theory rather than vice versa.⁸ In this manner, the data were analysed inductively and used for the derivation of key constructs.

Findings

The first question concerned the reasons for choosing Education as a field of study. The main reasons provided by respondents are their desire to teach and work with children. Some respondents state that they have always desired to teach and never considered another career option. Thus, the choice of Education as a field of study appears to be mainly based on intrinsic motivation.

A small number of respondents acknowledge the importance of external motives as influencing factors on the choice of career. Two respondents refer to the working hours, while one points to the satisfactory salary she expects to receive. Only one respondent links her choice to her gender,

saying that teaching is suitable for women. However, she stresses that this has not been the main reason for her decision:

It was a good profession for a woman. I have heard this since I was a small child. But this was not the main reason.

(3rd year student, primary education)

As regards the effect of societal expectations and trends on their choice, some respondents state that they have been influenced to some extent. At this point, respondents are more likely to refer to their gender as an important variable, even though their responses suggest that they are reluctant to acknowledge its role in their own personal decision-making process.

The truth is that regarding the profession, the general view is that for a woman it is better, to combine work with family, but not in my case to a great extent.

(4th year student, primary education)

At the beginning, I wanted to be a doctor. But I heard that Medicine is not good for girls, the working hours are difficult. I was not absolute as to the choice of Medicine or Education.

(2nd year student, primary education)

Six respondents state that they have not been influenced by societal tendencies to any extent and that the choice they have made is entirely their own. In their responses, they refer to the strength of internal motivation, which is given once again as the main reason for the choice of profession.

When asked about the importance of the family as an influencing factor, respondents express different opinions, even though most are keen to highlight their independence from their

families. However, several respondents stress that they had the support of their family, while others chose fields of study that did not deviate significantly from the desires of the family. For instance, two Pre-primary Education students note that their family had a preference for Primary Education but they chose Pre-primary instead.

As regards the effect of gender on the choice of Education as a field of study, most respondents dismiss the idea that their gender played a role in the decision-making process preceding entry into higher education. While acknowledging that Education is not chosen by many men as a field of study, eight respondents state that they have not been influenced by their gender. In general, respondents tend to avoid referring to their own situation in answering this question. They are more likely to refer to the need to avoid discrimination, considering men and women equally capable at the workplace. Moreover, some respondents state that their gender has not influenced them but at the same time, they indicate that they would have considered different choices *had they been men*.

Hmm...No. Even though I see that not many men choose it. I disagree. I believe that men and women can do the same thing, without differences in teaching performance.

(2nd year student, primary education)

Not gender. Now, if I were a man, I do not know what I would have chosen. I do not know...perhaps I would not have chosen to become a teacher.

(2nd year student, primary education)

Respondents are more likely to acknowledge gender effects on the choice of Education as a field of study when they are asked to discuss the influence of gender in an indirect, non-personal

manner. In this context, all respondents point to the importance of gender as an influencing factor. Six respondents consider it to be very influential, referring to gender stereotypes regarding suitable occupations for men and women.

OK, society, stereotypes more than anything, I think it has an effect. In Cyprus, there are no male pre-primary education teachers, no female pilots, no...I do not know, I think it has an effect.

(3rd year student, primary education)

It has a lot of influence. In general, in society, we have stereotypes. At the Education Department, the majority are girls because of the stereotype. In general, we have this stereotype, that girls should be teachers.

(3rd year student, primary education)

I can see from the student audience in my courses that it has a lot of influence. We have seven men and seventy women.

(2nd year student, primary education)

In answering this question, no respondent dismisses the influence of gender stereotypes on the choice of a field of study. In one case, a student suggests that that the degree of influence depends on whether relevant reference groups, and mostly the family, have embraced these stereotypes. In general, however, respondents acknowledge the effect of gender stereotypes and even refer to their influence on other decisions, such as the assignment of students to classes during the school experience courses. In doing so, for the first time in the interview, they draw attention to perceived differences between men and women.

If we judge by the number of students, of sixty people, in the best case, we will have ten boys. So, I think it plays a role. If I judge from school experience, men are assigned to higher grades of primary school. I do not know, because of patience perhaps, or because of maternal instinct, women may manage better with smaller children. Perhaps prejudice plays a role.

(4th year student, primary education)

In the last question, respondents were asked to discuss the expected effect of their gender on their career. Of the ten respondents, six believe that being a woman will not have a negative effect on their career progression. They feel that qualified women have nothing to fear and they appear optimistic about the future, dismissing the role of stereotypes. Even though they are aware of the fact that men are over-represented in leadership positions in education, they think that things will change (or have changed) to allow for the equal treatment of men and women.

I am optimistic ... It is a matter of personality. When a person is trained, when he/she has the qualifications, he/she will progress. Gender does not play a role.

(3rd year student, primary education)

Three respondents state that they expect their gender to have an effect on their career. One thinks that it is better for pre-primary education teachers to be female in that women inspire greater confidence and would be preferred for employment and career advancement at this level. Some respondents express their fear that they may face gender barriers, referring to the fact that women have to consider marriage and family issues at an earlier point in their lives. However, they generally expect to overcome them and choose to hope that their gender will not have negative effects on their career progression.

Hmm...In research that we conducted in the Educational Administration and Organisation course, we found that even though there are fewer male teachers, in leadership posts, there are more men. So there is a contradiction. But today, equal opportunities are offered at University and in postgraduate courses. I think my being a woman will not play a role in my promotion. Even though the bibliography shows otherwise, I hope this is not the case.

(4th year student, primary education)

As shown by their responses to this question, female students reject the idea of gender barriers and when they do acknowledge their presence, they tend to have faith in their ability to overcome them. This is the case despite the fact that they are generally aware of the presence of gender barriers in the educational system, having discussed their effects on the career progression of female teachers in one of their courses.

Discussion

The present study attempts to examine the effects of gender on the career aspirations and expectations of female students in Cyprus, in relation to the choice of Education as a field of study. The data collected through in-depth interviews with 10 female students of the Department of Education of the University of Cyprus reveal several interesting patterns: First, respondents appear to be reluctant to recognise the effect of gender on their own personal decisions and choices, probably out of a desire to assert their independence from societal expectations and stereotypes. The same applies to the family as a potential source of influence on students' plans. However, most students point to the higher representation of women in the student population, acknowledging that this is the result of gender stereotypes regarding the suitability of men and

women for a career in teaching. In this respect, the findings support the use of projective techniques in qualitative research in that they show that respondents are more likely to acknowledge the importance of certain motives and patterns of behaviour in the lives of others (in this case, peers).

Second, most female students appear to be satisfied with the choice of Education as a field of study, despite a dramatic deterioration in employment prospects in the last decade. In general, respondents do not appear to exhibit symptoms of cognitive dissonance, which can take place in situations where an individual's career expectations are not met. Several female students express opinions which suggest that they believe that teaching was written in the cards for them, that it was a matter of personal destiny. Of course, the respondents' reluctance to express doubts regarding their initial choice may be an indication of strong internal motivation in the choice of a field of study. However, previous studies of students' motivation in the pursuit of teaching as a career in Cyprus point to the importance of extrinsic motivating factors.⁹ Thus, the lack of dissonance on the part of respondents may be related to a deficit in their aspirations, which limits their study and career alternatives to jobs considered suitable for women.

Third, female students tend to be optimistic about the future in relation to their career progression in teaching. They are aware of the fact that women are under-represented in leadership posts in education, pointing to the bibliography on the gender gap in education and to information they received in one of their university courses. However, they do not dwell on this information, adopting an optimistic stance and investing in hope for the future. In this respect, the results support the findings of earlier research which show women to express conflicting and ambiguous views on gender discrimination, characterised by resistance to feminist positions.

Overall, the findings of the present study point to the possible effects of gender stereotypes on students' education and career choices, and to the fact that these effects may not be recognised by women. Since the relevant information received by female students at university is being dismissed or questioned, policy measures may be needed at earlier points in time for women to become aware of the role gender stereotypes can play in their lives. There is a need for girls to gain awareness of the effects of gender stereotypes before making decisions and choices that may have a negative impact on their future development and career progression.

¹ Bruce Carrington, "A Quintessentially Feminine Domain? Student Teachers' Constructions of Primary Teaching as a Career," *Educational Studies* 28 (2002): 287-303.

² John W. Martino, "Male Teachers as Role Models: Addressing Issues of Masculinity, Pedagogy and the Re-masculinisation of Schooling," *Curriculum Inquiry* 38 (2008): 190-223.

³ Jillian Blackmore, *Troubling Women: Feminism, Leadership and Educational Change* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1999).

⁴ Charol Shakeshaft, *Women in Educational Administration* (New York: Sage, 1987).

⁵ Simon L. Dolan, Alberto Bejarano and Shay Tzafrir, "Exploring the Moderating Effect of Gender in the Relationship between Individuals' Aspirations and Career Success among Engineers in Peru," *The International Journal of Human Resource Management* 1 (2011): 1-22.

⁶ A. J. Metz, Nadya Fouad and Kris Ihle-Helledy, "Career Aspirations and Expectations of College Students: Demographics and Labour Market Influences," *Journal of Career Assessment* 17 (2009): 155-171.

⁷ Cyprus Educational Service Commission, *Official Website* (Available at: <http://www.eey.gov.cy>).

⁸ Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company, 1967).

⁹ Michalinos Zembylas and Elena Papanastasiou, "Job Satisfaction among School Teachers in Cyprus," *Journal of Educational Administration* 42 (2004): 357-74.