

# MALE STUDENTS IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION TECHNIQUES:

## CAN WE HELP THEM TO COMPLETE THEIR PROGRAM OF STUDIES?

When we know the positive impact on child development that having two parents who act in different but complementary ways can have (Besnard, 2008), we are struck by the lack of male figures in educative daycare services. Indeed, only 4% of the educators who provide services offered in childcare centres (CPE – *Centres de la petite enfance*) are men. (*Institut de la statistique du Québec, 2008*)

Traditionally reserved for women, the profession of early-childhood educator is where we find the highest segregation with regard to gender (Sumsion, 2005). What is more, when analyzing college registration statistics, again we are struck by the fact that, of the small number of male students interested in studying Early Childhood Education (ECE) techniques (a mere 3.5% of registrations come from males), only one in four will complete the training. So, beyond the fact that few male students are attracted to ECE training, the majority will abandon it en route. Why is this? Are these students welcome? Has the program become too feminized for them to be comfortable? Are there other factors at play? What good research questions to try to solve!

Our duo began by diving into the process of obtaining financial support from MELS (*Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir, et du Sport*) through the *Programme d'aide à la recherche sur l'enseignement et l'apprentissage (PAREA)* program. The funds obtained allowed us to take the last two years to describe the reality experienced by these male students in this mostly female field of training.



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The purpose of our research was to try to describe the reality for male students in ECE and to identify the personal and environmental factors that can influence their involvement in this program. Using a mixed quantitative and qualitative methodology, the perceptions of the place of males in ECE were collected from a variety of players: 1) 625 Secondary V students, that is to say potentially our future ECE students; 2) 19 male students registered in ECE who are pursuing the program or who have dropped out; 3) 45 teachers in ECE; and 4) 90 colleagues in the future work milieu for program graduates, that is 70 ECE administrators and 20 experienced educators. The standpoint we chose for addressing this problem is situated within a pedagogical aim. In fact, since we are both ECE teachers, we were interested in the factors that could influence the persistence and success rates of male students in ECE training, rather than approaching the problem from a psychological or sociological angle.

Persistence and success in college studies are complex and multifaceted phenomena (Barbeau, 2007; Sauvé *et al.*, 2007). Since, to the best of our knowledge, no other studies in Quebec have focused specifically on the persistence and success of males in an area of training that is predominantly female, we were interested in the various factors recognized in the literature that relate to persistence in college studies for male students in general. These factors were identified, then grouped according to Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological model (see Figure 1): that is to say, the students' personal factors (ontosystem), factors in their immediate environments (family and social microsystems), factors in their academic environments (school microsystem) and those connected to the values of society (macrosystem). Most theoretical models that seek to explain student dropping-out and persistence are interactionist and presuppose that the decision to interrupt one's studies results from the accumulation of several factors (see Sauvé *et al.*, 2007 for a review). However, if students have the responsibility for adopting attitudes and behaviours that promote their success, so colleges also have a major responsibility with regard to student commitment. They can generate it or, on the contrary, impede it, even though this may be involuntary (*Conseil supérieur de l'éducation, 2008*). This ecological grid was used for the interpretation of the data collected within the framework of the study which is the subject of this article.

## RESULTS

Various information-gathering sessions provided us with a large amount of raw data that is impossible to account for in its entirety here. (For detailed results see the PAREA report by Besnard and Diren, 2009). However, to synthesize, the analysis of all the results enabled us to identify two particular types of scholastic path that male students in ECE may follow. These findings were corroborated by both the students and their teachers.

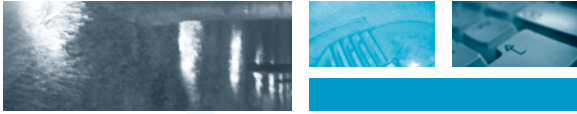
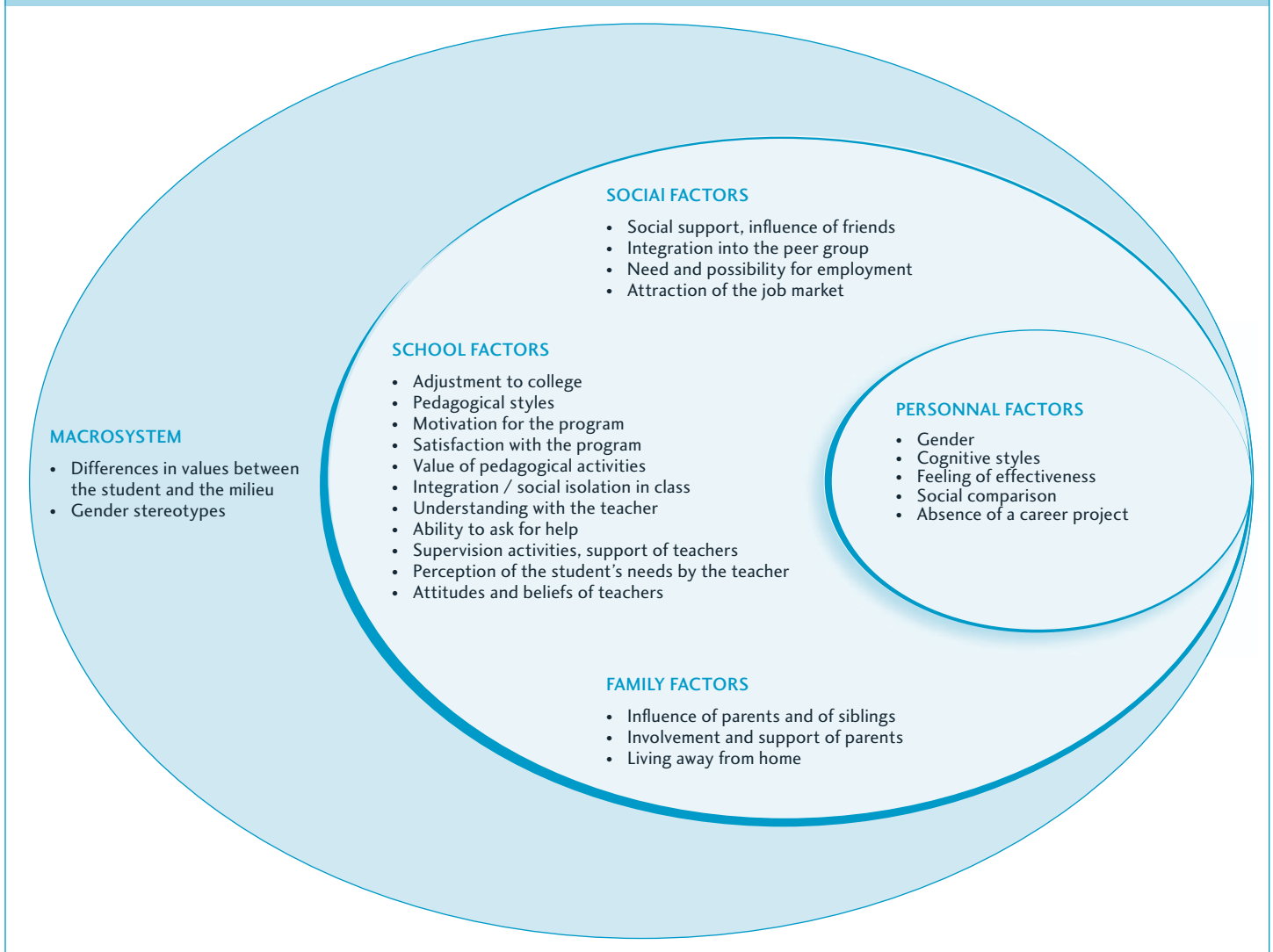


Figure 1

ECOLOGICAL GRID USED FOR THE RESEARCH



For the majority of male students who begin their college studies, the quality of their adaptation to CEGEP seems to be a determining factor for the pursuit of their studies (Tremblay, 1999). The results of our research have brought to light certain additional challenges that young men in ECE must face. First, they must deal with the reaction of their entourage to the fact that they have chosen a training program that leads to a non-traditional profession. Then, in class, they must face a group composed essentially of female students, work within this minority experience and face prejudices concerning their sexual orientation: "The first question when we are in early childhood education is, 'Are you gay?'" (Male student in ECE). In addition to the challenges male students face at school, there are others that arise during work placement: on the one hand, that of accepting their different ways of intervening

with children, combined with the absence of male role models, and on the other hand, that of being confronted by prejudices coming from parents, such as suspicions of pedophilia and a fear that their children will be fondled inappropriately. The following comment is from a male student in ECE: "I have seen parents ask to have their child change groups, parents who are prejudiced and fear for their child."



What strategies do young men in ECE adopt in order to cope with this reality? Figure 2 presents our results.

Since our study is descriptive, we cannot establish links between these strategies and persistence in the program. However, we observe that “winning” strategies were described more often by male students who completed their training or who were still in the process of doing so. As for “less effective” strategies, they were most often described by students who had dropped out of the training. For the latter, adaptation problems seem to accumulate over the course of the training and to become exacerbated during work placement. This reality is, to some degree, the trigger that leads them to leave the program once and for all.

## DISCUSSION

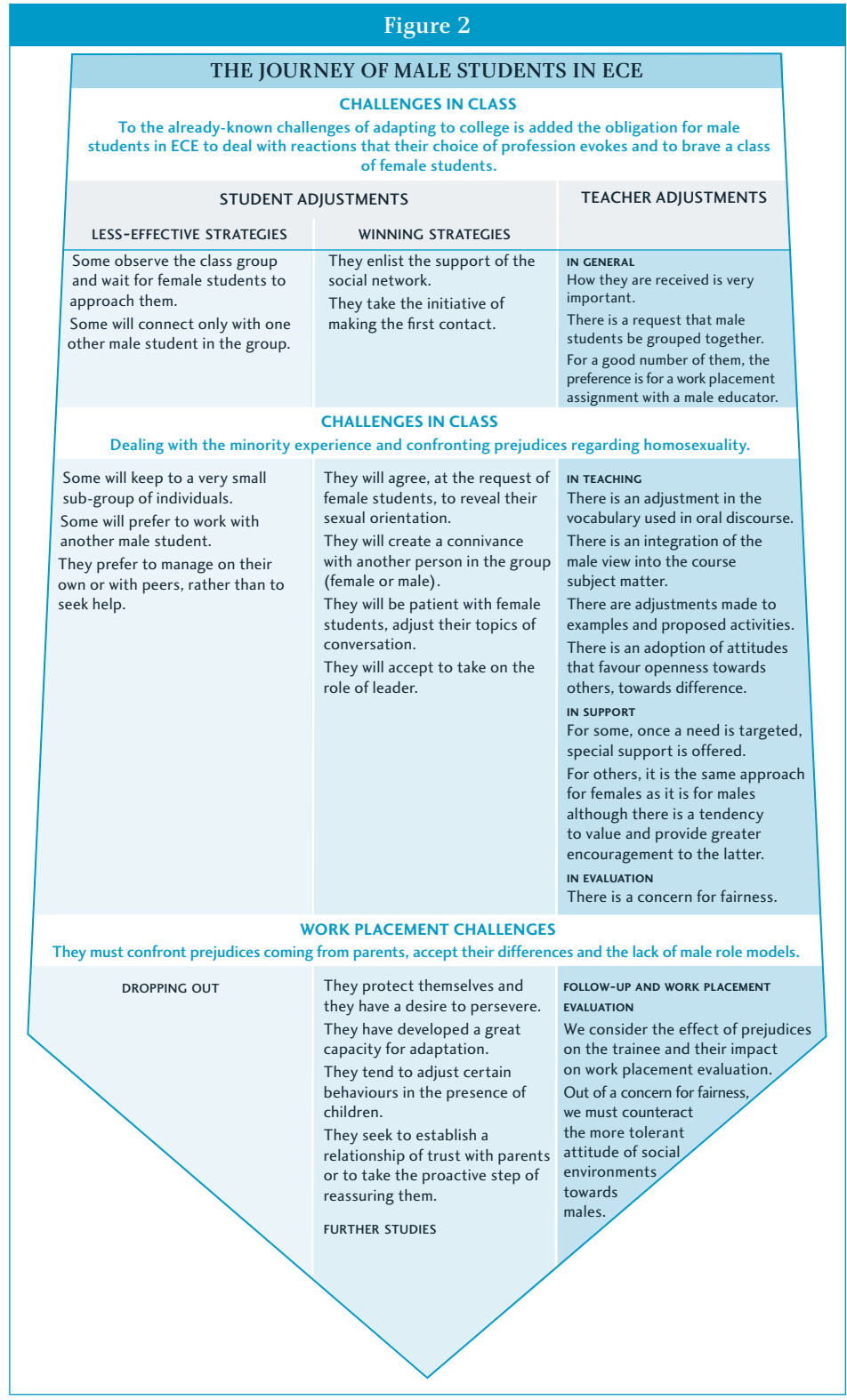
As we mentioned earlier, there are many factors that are known to influence male students’ persistence in school. However, the reality for young men who register in ECE is certainly unique and, in the discussion that follows, we will try to determine the factors that seem to play a significant role for this specific clientele.

### ONTOSYSTEM

When it comes to personal factors, the literature indicates that, in general, males are less successful in scholastic terms than females at the same academic level, and different studies have focussed precisely on the success of male students (Lapostolle, Bélanger and Pinho, 2003; Tremblay *et al.*, 2006).

However, the data in the present study indicate that male students who dropped out of the program did not do so because they were failing in school, but rather because they were facing certain adaptation problems. For some, the observation

Figure 2





was made that there was too great a gap between their values and those associated with the profession. For others, reasons of a more personal nature were evoked. We can therefore advance the hypothesis that available data on learning problems of male students do not seem, on the whole, to be at issue in the present context.

Moreover, the group of male students we met feel that they are in their proper place in ECE training. Our results lead us to believe that these young people have developed a feeling of personal effectiveness in this profession (Bandura and Bussey, 2004) and that this feeling allows them to believe in their ability to succeed despite the fact that they are in a context of marginalization. The results obtained suggest that this feeling of effectiveness was already present when they enrolled. In fact, these young men all mentioned that they had some experience working with young children and that their competencies in this field had already been recognized by significant people in their entourage. So these young men make this professional choice not only because they like working with children, but also because they believe that they are “good” in this field. This positive perception of their own abilities has also been recognized in other studies as being more likely to be found in male than in female students (Vezeau and Bouffard, 2007).

The transition from secondary school to college represents a more critical period for male than for female students (Sauvé and *et al.*, 2007; Tremblay *et al.*, 2006), with the first session presenting notably greater challenges for young men in general (Gingras and Terrill, 2006). In our research, the average age of the male students interviewed (they were between 19 and 37 years of age, with an average age of 24) was clearly above that of the average college student clientele (19.3 years, according to Roy, 2008). The younger students who arrive directly from secondary school mentioned to us that this transition presented a tough challenge for them, while older students seemed to adapt more easily to this program of studies.

As for learning, several studies have revealed differences between male and female students, notably regarding the way they see school work (Margueritte, 2008; Rivière and Jacques, 2000; Statistics Canada, 2004). The results of our research confirm the gap in this field. The majority of young men studying in ECE and participating in our research recognized that they had not placed a high value on grades and that they often waited until the last minute to hand in assignments. We know that the effort invested in school work generally has an impact on the level of success. Now, the students in our sample also mentioned that they invested little effort in their school work, that they managed to succeed in spite of this and that they were content with their performances (average grade around 74%). Our results also underline the fact that once they are over the hump of integration into the class, these male students are appreciated, mothered and spoiled as much in class as in the daycare centres where they carry out their work placements. We can hypothesize that this type of experience reinforces the students' feelings of effectiveness, in spite of their average school results.

#### FAMILY AND SOCIAL MICROSYSTEMS

The impact of the quality of support offered through the social network on persistence in school has been extensively studied (Bourdon *et al.*, 2007; Boisvert and Martin, 2006; Schmidt *et al.*, 2003; Tinto, 2000). More specifically, the importance that parents and close relatives give to the scholastic aspirations of male and female

students is a key factor for them (Looker, 2004). In this case, the young men we interviewed told us that the reactions of the people in their entourage with regard to their choice of vocation were divided. Reactions were positive especially when members of their immediate environment were expecting their choice of training and recognized their skills for exercising this profession.

*[...] male students who dropped out of the program did not do so because they were failing in school, but rather because they were facing certain adaptation problems.*

For most of the young men we met, there was at least one person in their immediate entourage who encouraged them to embark on ECE studies. Conversely, a majority of the participants also reported negative reactions to their choice of profession. These reactions ranged from surprise to expressing stereotypes or to belittling, pure and simple. Nevertheless, in their comments, we can say that they seem to place little importance on these negative comments, as long as they come from people who are less significant in their eyes.

#### THE CLASS MICROSYSTEM

Some studies conducted by the *Conseil supérieur de l'éducation* (2008) show that male and female students coming from Humanities and Social Science programs are more satisfied with their programs of study than those from other programs. Our results emphasize, in fact, that on the whole, male students generally appreciate the ECE program. Furthermore, they feel welcomed, taken into consideration and appreciated, especially by their teachers. As demonstrated by Tremblay *et al.*, (2006), the quality of the relationship with the teaching personnel and the value this conveys to



the students can be a determining factor in their persistence.

Our results also reveal the importance of peer relationships in the program. In fact, the minority situation of males in this female universe confers on them a special status that seems to emphasize the adaptation process, whether it be negative or positive. Thus it is reported, as much by teachers as by students, that the leadership of male students is encouraged. By contrast, when perceived differences are too great, rejection by the female students in the class can be merciless. We already know that class atmosphere and group spirit favours the consolidation of one's choice of vocation (Tremblay *et al.*, 2006). This dimension seems to become established around interpersonal relationship modalities that are certainly unique and which would be well worth investigating in more depth in the future in order to identify possible connections with the degree of commitment of these male students in their training.

*[...] the young men involved in our research specified their preference for strategies that enable them to be active and involved [...].*

It is recognized that certain pedagogical approaches are more supportive of male students' involvement (Aubé, 2002). In fact, the young men who participated in our research specified their preference for strategies that enable them to be active and involved, something which they find to a great extent in the current ECE program.

Furthermore, for teachers, the results indicate the concern they have for developing the same competencies in female and male students as well as with treating them fairly, especially when it comes to evaluation.

Questioning on the part of the teaching personnel as to whether or not to adapt their teaching strategies to meet the needs of this minority of male students is present and remains unanswered. Apart from a few initiatives such as adapting vocabulary or using examples of male educators, the ECE teaching personnel generally mention that they offer more sustained support and follow-up to male students: "I do not change my teaching at all, but I encourage them a lot and I try to make them feel valued [...]. Do I do this to a greater extent? Definitely, I admit it." (Female teacher in ECE).

### MACROSYSTEMS

In societal terms, some studies report that the presence of differences that are too great between the students' values and those of the environment in which they evolve, be it in school or during work placements, also has an impact on persistence in school (Chénard, Francoeur and Doray, 2007; Tinto, 2000). However, according to Bouchard, St-Amant and Gagnon (2000), male students are not as successful as female students and they develop a negative view of school precisely because they reject the "feminized" profile of academic success adopted by female students and they fear being associated with so-called effeminate behaviour and labeled as "homo, queer or wimp".

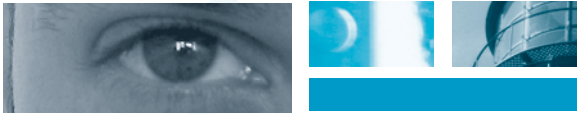
This fear that homosexual behaviour will taint their masculinity is at its strongest in adolescents, and male students tend to subscribe more than female students to the sexist stereotypes that prevail in society (Bouchard and St-Amant, 1996). The various results that we obtained are in line with those of preceding studies. First, our results reveal that males in secondary school produce significantly more negative prejudices towards young men who are heading for the ECE program than young women of the same age. Next, although the group of respondents indicated that according to them there are differences between how men and women interact with children, it appears to be very difficult to name these differences without falling right into gender stereotypes. A majority of the male students in ECE mentioned the importance of feeling confirmed and valued in their actions with children and they brought out the lack of access to male educator role models. Finally, some mentioned having been victims of prejudice on the part of parents during their work placement and most fear that this will eventually happen to them.

### CONCLUSION

It emerges from our study that certain factors seem to play a particular role in the unique situation of male students in ECE.

It is our observation that many prejudices continue to exist in society with regard to men who want to work with children and that these prejudices are particularly felt by adolescents just at the time when they are required to make choices for their college training.

We also observe that male students who embark on their studies in ECE having already developed a feeling of effectiveness with children seem to be more able to face the many challenges they encounter during their school journey. Moreover, the fact that these students had a significant person in their entourage who believed in their training plans seems to act as a buffer against offensive remarks to which they



will inevitably be subjected during their training. In terms of the class microsystem, adaptation to the group seems to play an overriding role in young men's pursuit of their studies in ECE. In this respect, the quality of the relationship that they will develop with teachers appears to contribute to both their integration into the class group and to the feeling of effectiveness that they must maintain in spite of their differences. Finally, in work-placement milieux, the lack of male role models seems to present a problem. Therefore, the capacity to adapt to this mainly female work environment, combined with the prejudices of some parents, would appear to be the stumbling block that will make the difference between those who will pursue their studies and those who will drop out.

*[...] when male students who embark on their studies in ECE have already developed a feeling of effectiveness with children, they seem to be more able to face the many challenges they encounter during their educational journey.*

Our research also brought out a few recommendations. It appears that if we want to increase the number of male students who persevere with their ECE training, our recruiting efforts should target older students. In fact, adult students, who have usually acquired a certain maturity and a greater level of self-confidence, seem better equipped to handle the multiple challenges that male students face in ECE. It also seems to us that teachers should be better informed of the specific adaptation challenges facing male students in ECE and they should be supported in their application of proactive support measures, especially by being made aware of the importance of providing role models of male educators and of including in their courses the teaching of strategies for guarding against false accusations with regard to sexual fondling. In societal terms, it also seems to us to be important to continue to promote the positive role a male presence plays in child development and to continue to fight against homophobia, especially among adolescents.

The results presented here should be interpreted bearing in mind the inherent limitations of our research. Although we attempted to give an overall description of the phenomenon of male students in ECE, this description is essentially based on the perceptions of the various players involved.

The hypothesis paths emanating from the portrait depicted by these participants will need to be verified by subsequent studies. Moreover, in our research, only the reality experienced by male students in ECE was described without comparing it to the experience of female students in the same program. Some details described in the study, for example the importance of class-group integration or the impact of the first work placement, could be determining factors as much for male students as for female students. We cannot know if the details depicted here are unique to the ECE program or to the gender of the student.

Finally, in terms of the representativeness of our sample, to be precise only five participants had dropped out of the program. If we had based the study on the proportion of male students who complete the program on a province-wide scale as compared to those who register, our sample would have contained three times more drop-outs. The results reported here are undeniably more descriptive of the reality lived by male students who persist with ECE training rather than the reality of those who have left the program. The small number of males who dropped out

of the ECE program does not allow us to generalize our results to the overall population of students who leave the program. A lot of work remains to be done if we want to provide more support to male students in the ECE program and to encourage their perseverance. For example, in future studies, it would be interesting to test and evaluate different ways of supporting these male students or to study the elements that are common to students in a minority situation, regardless of program. As we can see, this research topic is still in its infancy. We hope that this first explorative study will have contributed to opening the way. ●

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