

Male Teacher Representation in Early Childhood Care Education Profession

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Abstract.

Early Childhood Care Education seems to be globally dominated by female educators. The purpose of the study was to explore the absence of male teacher representation in Early Childhood Care Education and strategies that could be employed to attract more male educators into the profession. The study adopted a constructivist paradigm and qualitative approach. Data were generated from the review of literature on male teacher representation in Early Childhood Care Education and analysed qualitatively. Derrida's deconstruction theory formed the theoretical framework for the investigation. The study revealed that most people do not approve of male teachers taking care of children in early childhood. The study concluded that most men do not like to teach at that level because parents are skeptical about them. However, some men still prefer Early Childhood Care Education as a profession provided society supports them.

Keywords; care, childhood, education, male, profession, representation, teacher

1. Background

The subject of male educators in Early Childhood Care Education (ECCE) has been an ongoing dialectic globally. Studies carried out in Trinidad and Tobago by Brown (2018) show that men found in early childhood care face challenges of negative perceptions from society, in fact, they are not offered enough support by society (Vuyiseka, 2022). Taking the discussion further is Farquhar's (2017) observation that male teachers at ECCE are perceived as either homosexuals or paedophilia. The assertions imply that society does not approve of male teachers in early childhood care. The scarcity of male representation at ECCE is seen in studies carried out in Finland which show 10% of men in early childhood, 4% in Germany, and 2% in the US (Mashija, 2014 & Farquhar, 2015). The absence of male educators in ECCE has repercussions on the development of grade R learners. Furthermore, Solomon & Henderson (2016) state that the importance of early childhood is that children develop their gender identity. This implies that if children miss one gender in their development and education, their development and growth will be imbalanced. Sharing the same idea is Giese's (2018) understanding that the growth of a child is incomplete if they do not experience a comparable range of models of masculinity & knowing what it means to be a boy or a man. Some scholars argue that the presence of male educators in ECCE could be beneficial to children at that stage (Mathwasa & Lwazi, 2021). For instance, Vuyiseka (2022) states that some parents speak highly of males as teachers because they serve as role models to male students in the centers. Besides, Page (2019) revealed that male practitioners possess certain learning styles which could be advantageous to a male child. It can therefore be deduced from the scholars above that some members of society see the positives in the male educators. The above studies have contributed to the male representation in ECCE but very few focused on specifically the absence of male educators at that level and why it is important to have them as well as the strategies that could be used to recruit more men in the profession. My study is unique in the sense that it calls for strategies for the recruitment of more men in ECCE as a profession. The study is arranged as follows: problem statement, research questions, theoretical framework, methodology, literature review, data presentation/ findings, analysis and discussion, conclusion as well as recommendation.

1.1 Problem statement

There is a low representation of male educators in Early Childhood Care Education globally. This is in line with Joseph and Wright's (2016) statement that the presence of male teachers in ECCE is almost non-existent and the statistics from Australia shows that only 2% of males make the early childhood profession (Demopoulos, 2012). The problem seems to hamper the psycho-social and educational development of children in Grade R. Mathwasa and Sibanda (2021) further opine that the absence of male educators in Early Childhood Development (ECD) programmes has created a gap in the momentum of success gained through fathers' involvement in early childhood. In addition, research shows that for children who grow up without male figures as their role models, their childhood development is imbalanced (Mathwasa & Sibanda, 2021; Page, 2019). They miss activities that are manly-oriented. The aim of this study was to explore the absence of male teacher representation in ECCE and what could be done to improve the situation.

1.1.1 Research questions

The study was guided by the following research questions:

What are the reasons for poor male teacher representation in ECCE?

What strategies could be used to recruit more males into the profession?

1.1.2 Theoretical framework

The study is premised on deconstruction theory. Deconstruction theory is a form of philosophical and literal analysis developed in the 1960s by the French Philosopher Jacques Derrida (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2023). The theory was a reaction to the primacy of structuralism and a repressive academic and intellectual system that rigidly administered a unique and definitive interpretation of a literary text (Hendricks, 2016). The scholar further explains that deconstruction was a critique of the Western philosophical tradition which was seen as a reaction against some important 20th-century philosophical movements. It was also developed as a response to the predominant and oppressive authoritative educational and scholarly system that governed the absolute and authoritative interpretation of a literary text. It can be inferred that there was only one way of meaning-making of a text (literal meaning). In fact, readers ought to interpret the text following a particular structured procedure hence structuralism. Deconstruction was applied to work by Derrida, Paul de Man, J. Hillis Miller, and Barbara Johnson in the 1970s (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2023). According to Turner (2016), the concept was first outlined by Derrida in *Of Grammatology* in which he explored the relationship between language and the construction of meaning. In his view, deconstruction is a successful means of saying things about the text. This implies that a text has multiple meanings (literal and connotative/figurative). It can therefore be interpreted in different ways depending on the context. One may not necessarily have to look at the grammatical structure only but words association (anaphoric and cataphoric references) and other possible meanings of a text as well for better comprehension. Derrida explains that deconstruction is rather the dismantling of cultural, philosophical, and institutional structures. The implication is that meaning could be derived from a text by examining it culturally, philosophically and institutionally. The theory holds that every system is a social construction, that is, something that has been assembled and constructed entails exclusions, so deconstruction seeks out those points or cracks in the system where it disguises the fact of its incompleteness, its failure to cohere as a self-contained whole (Hendricks, 2016). In the context of this study, the understanding that male educators may not be able to take care of young children is a social construction that could be challenged/ changed because it raises several questions (gaps) to be filled. The theory interrogates those underlying meanings and implications since knowledge/ experience is a social construction, therefore, there are multiple meanings to a text. The assertion is in line with Sikiriva's (2020) understanding that a text always has cracks and fissures by which it is unavoidably exposed to the outside; it is open to another reader, to ever-changing interpretations. The male-educator representation in Early Childhood Care Education could be explored and interpreted from different angles, for example, implications of societal beliefs and attitudes that women are more nurturing than men and can take good care of young children (Mathwasa & Sibanda, 2021). This theory is therefore used to deconstruct/ question/challenge such institutional beliefs and create new knowledge.

Deconstruction is also founded on the opinion that people usually express their thoughts in terms of binary oppositions, with the claim that each term of a binary opposition always affects the other (Sikiriva, 2020). Thus, we can define one of the terms of opposition by mentioning the other term, and vice versa because each term contains what Derrida calls the *trace* of its opposite. They are contrasting concepts that make it possible for us to understand each other holistically, for example, we can understand darkness because we understand light, and noise because we know silence. We understand the absence of male-teacher representation at ECCD because we know the possibilities of the presence. This theory attempts to fill the cracks/ gaps left by the existing knowledge on the phenomenon.

Generally, Derrida asserts that deconstruction is an activity of reading and interpreting literary texts which is a philosophical theoretical analysis and a critical outlook concerned with the relationship between text and meaning (Sikiriva, 2020). The scholar further states that it is a mode of criticism and analytical inquiry that denotes pursuing the meaning of a text to expose the supposed contradictions and internal oppositions upon which it is founded. That is a philosophical framework of reading between the lines in search of hidden and alternative meanings. The theory corresponds with the interpretivist/constructivism paradigm based on reality and every system being socially constructed (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This theory is relevant to this study because it challenges and attempts to change the already existing social construction which is the societal belief that men are not expected to teach in early childhood care education because of their gender and societal suspicions and skepticism.

The constructed knowledge categorizes male teachers as subjects of skepticism and inability to take care of the young children in grade R. The theory advocates for the deconstruction of such cultural and gender-based structures, that is, it challenges the presence in western belief and philosophy as the absolute truth, pure and unchallenged (Hendricks, 2016). The theory, therefore, questions the fundamental distinctions/ oppositions in Western philosophy through a close examination of the language and logic of philosophical and literary texts. It looks at the opposite/differences in meaning, a reduction of a text for there is nothing outside/ beyond the text (Turner, 2016).

2. Methodology

This study is qualitative in nature. It is a critical review of the global existing literature on male representation in Early Childhood Care Development (ECCD) over the past ten years. This study is supported by the interpretivist/constructivism paradigm. The two paradigms are used interchangeably in this study because of their interrelatedness, for example, constructivism claims that reality is socially constructed and subjective therefore, it aims to generate knowledge through people's individual viewpoints and the significance ascribed to those viewpoints (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Construction comes as a result of interpretation, that is, one is able to make meaning after grappling with the text for understanding. Furthermore, constructivists view knowledge as constructed by the processes individuals undertake (interpret) to make sense of their lived experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The scholars imply that knowledge/understanding about the male educators' representation in ECCD was constructed after critically examining and interpreting the relevant literature.

The constructivist paradigm grew out of the philosophy of Edmund Husserl's phenomenology and Wilhelm Dilthey's and other German philosophers' study on interpretive understanding called hermeneutics (Eichelberger, 1989). Hermeneutics is defined as the study of the interpretive understanding or meaning of something from a certain standpoint or situation (Mertens, 2005; Maree, 2012). The researcher viewed the existing reality, which analysed and interpreted the existing/current literature on the scholarship of male representation in ECCD, and filled the gap left by the literature thus constructing new knowledge in that field. The researcher's choice of interpretive/ constructivist paradigm has formed the basis for this study due to among other qualities, the claim that truth is dependent on people's interpretation of facts (Cilliers et al., 2014). Constructivism/interpretivist also follows the qualitative research approach that corresponds with the chosen paradigm. Constructivists/interpretivist does not seek to generalise but to thoroughly understand the phenomenon. Interpretivist researchers use methods that are sensitive to the context for purposes of an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon therein (Cilliers et al., 2014). Similarly, qualitative research seeks for an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon.

This is in line with the understanding that qualitative research can be defined as an inquiry process of understanding where a researcher develops a complex, holistic picture, analyses words, reports, and detailed views of the informants, and conducts the study in a natural setting (Creswell and Poth, 2018; Rajasekar, Philominathan & Channathambi, 2013; Leedy & Jeanne, 2010; Maree, 2010; Creswell, 2007). In addition, qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them (Aspers Patrick & Corte Ugo, 2019). Qualitative research also allows one to explore or investigate the quality of relationships, activities, situations, or materials (Fraenkel, Wallen & Hyun, 2015). It allows the reader to know something new and probably find viable solutions to a problem (Islam et al., 2022). In the context of this study, the researcher explored the literature on the male educator's representation in Early Childhood Care Education with the intention to find the trend, gaps, challenges and solutions. Data were analysed qualitatively. The qualitative analysis includes the interpretation, identification and examination of patterns and themes in textual data which determines how the themes and patterns help understand phenomena in a deeper way for answering questions (Islam et al., 2022).

The researcher critically examined the literature on the phenomenon, identified patterns, categorised them into themes, interpreted them, and constructed new knowledge. Qualitative analysis can also be referred to as a method to analyse a certain subject using non-numeric plus non-quantifiable indicators, behavior, and characteristics to determine its overall situation, quality, value, or any other parameter (Team Wallstreetmojo & Vaidya Dheeraj, 2023). The researcher did not look at the quantity of the literature around the phenomenon but the depth. Thematic Analysis (TA) is a method for systematically identifying, organising, and offering insight into patterns of meaning (themes) across a dataset. Through focusing on meaning across a dataset, TA allows the researcher to see and make sense of collective or shared meanings and experiences. Identifying unique and idiosyncratic meanings and experiences found only within a single data item is not the focus of TA. This method, then, is a way of identifying what is common to the way a topic is discussed or written about, and of making sense of those commonalities.

3. Literature Review

3.1 Society's perceptions of male educators in ECCE

People have different views about the relationship between child development and the contribution male teachers could make in early childhood education. Early Childhood is identified as a period that covers the pre-natal phase to 8 years during which the brain develops, it is the time a child needs extreme attention and care (Mathwasa & Lwazi, 2021). Furthermore, it is an important time for children to acquire cognition regarding gender identity (Callahan & Lucy, 2019; Tayler & Price, 2019). The scholars' assertions imply that, if a child misses a male role model at this stage of development, such a child is not complete in the sense that his acquired knowledge and experience are limited to female exposure. Male practitioners provide alternative male role models who are safe, respectful, caring and they meet the needs of boys who come from female background families (Tembo, 2021; Xu, 2020 & Graham, 2018, Mistry & Good, 2013). Furthermore, Mathwasa & Lwazi (2021) opine that studies confirm that men's involvement in ECCE is crucial for the children's social, emotional and cognitive development. It is therefore necessary to adjust the balance in the number of male and female teachers in early childhood education (Brownhill & Oates, 2017).

3.2 Reasons for the absence of male representation in ECCE

Literature shows various reasons why men are few in the profession. For example, traditional and social constraints can be considered factors that can negatively impact the number of teachers in the preschool and lead to an excessive number of female teachers (Ceng & Luo, 2020; Brandes et al., 2015). As a consequence, male teachers avoid pursuing a career in preschool because they are trusted less compared to their female counterparts (Brownhill & Oates, 2017). The public believes that women are more nurturing than men (Mathwasa & Sibanda, 2021) and this has become a hindrance to men who anticipate pursuing careers in early childhood education. The scholars further argue that women have dominated in the area of (ECCE). It can be inferred therefore that society prefers women's care for their children as opposed to their male counterparts because of their natural caring ability. In addition, another contributing factor to the scarcity of men at ECCE is the fear of child abuse allegations (Zhai, 2017). Some members of society believe that men are likely to abuse young children, so such a public suspicion serves as a pooling factor away from teaching at early childhood level (Joseph and Wright, 2016). On the contrary, some researchers have shown that some female teachers are also capable of abusing and physically punishing children, while male teachers can also treat children with love and care (Sun et al., 2019; Brownhill & Oates, 2017). This implies that even though male teachers are the prime suspects of child abuse in early childhood education, some female teachers could also abuse children.

Men themselves consider ECCE as a low-status career (Joseph and Wright, 2016). This is in line with the understanding that there is a strong link between low pay and social status as shown by many studies in conjunction with the reluctance of men to enter the preschool workforce (Ceng & Luo, 2020; Brandes et al., 2015). The low salary and low status of preschool teachers as well as the constraints of traditional social attitudes are factors that may lead to a lower number of male kindergarten teachers than the female ones (Wu, 2023). The scholars associate ECCE with the social status which male teachers at that level do not get.

Another contributing factor is the lack of respect for pre-teachers regarding men's choice of becoming preschool teachers (Brownhill & Oates, 2017; Brandes et al., 2015). It can be deduced that men do not feel respected if teaching grade R. children. They therefore might feel undervalued and underpaid compared to teachers at other stages of education (Wu, 2023; Dan, 2016).

For those who are already in the profession face challenges of negative perceptions from society (Brown, 2018). Farquhar (2017) argues that for those who are male educators, it is assumed they are either homosexuals or paedophiles. The statements mean that society is negative, suspicious and skeptical about male educators. This situation frustrates those who have already joined the profession and even deters those who may want to join. The literature further points out that some people hold that the work of preschool teachers does not require high professional and technical skills, so they do not deserve high school status and high salaries (Lv, 2019). The statement belittles the profession itself because preschool teachers are the ones that need high professional and special skills to found and build young kids who are at the stage of exploration and psychological development.

Contrary to the above statements, male educators are ironically expected to lead learners in physical activities such as sports yet they are the ones not trusted most around young ones. Lack of trust is consistent with Hu et al., (2020) and Brandes et al.,'s (2015) proclamation that some male preschool teachers complain that they choose an activity such as playing football with the learners mainly because they are expected to by female colleagues, schools & parents, rather than their wishes. This implies that the early childhood education system needs men in order to perform those masculine tasks even though they are under public surveillance.

3.3 The importance of male educators in ECCE

The education system at ECCE requires the presence of male educators to balance gender because children are at their cognitive developmental stage and they learn from both sexes. This is in line with Mathwasa & Sibanda's (2021) opinion that the presence of male educators in ECCE is crucial for children's social, emotional, and cognitive development. The inclusion of male teachers in the classroom may place more emphasis on masculinity when learning material and activities associated with masculinity are being taught (Xu, 2019; Ternnoff, Nentwhich, and Vogt (2015). More men will benefit from the early childhood education profession by creating a different working dynamic at school. This could raise teachers' status and boys could better explore their interests with the help of males (Zhang, 2017). The statements above indicate the importance of male teachers' inclusion in the system and that it gives a different dimension altogether. The scholar further argues that male presence in ECCE will benefit all children with a male role model, especially those who have a single-parent family or long hours working parent (Zhang, 2017).

Taking the discussion further is Vuyiseka's (2022) proclamation that some parents speak highly of male practitioners as they serve as role models to male children in the centers as well as instilling discipline in the children. Researchers also agree that early childhood is an important time for them to acquire cognition regarding gender identity (Callalian & Lucy, 2019; Wingrave, 2018). It is therefore, crucial to bring male educators into the classroom. This is in line with Brownhill & Oates's (2017) opinion that it is necessary to adjust the balance in the number of male and female teachers in early childhood education. Male teachers believe that participation in children's games is convenient for them to provide help during the game and enable them to better understand and observe children (Qian et al., 2016). It is therefore observed that the absence of male educators in ECCE programmes have created a gap in the momentum success gained through fathers' involvement in the early life of a child (Mathwasa & Sibanda, 2021). It is therefore, necessary to fill the gap by exploring the mechanics to be put in place to improve the inclusivity of more male educators at ECCD/ECCE.

3.4 What could be done to increase male teachers' representation at ECCD?

According to UNESCO, ECCE teachers need to receive training and know how to carry out a gender analysis in relation to their work as that will help them treat both girls and boys with equal respect and support every child to express ideas and participate fully in all activities. The organization further suggests that community leaders should be encouraged to recognize the importance of ECCE and the need to promote gender equality in ECCE programmes. Xu (2019) also opines that the government should take a lead in addressing the issue of scarcity of men in early childhood classroom and the university should play a more active role in boosting enrolment of male participation in early childhood programmes. That is, the government and institutions of higher learning should devise strategies to attract men to join ECCE as a profession. The government should put in place programmes and formulate policies that would help eradicate gender bias and stereotypes in the ECCD sector (Vuyiseka, 2022). The scholar further suggests that preschools should include males in management positions of the centres as to make the centers accessible to males. Furthermore, according to Wu (2023), there is a need for educational institutions to improve the salaries and conditions of male and female teachers to attract more male teachers to the ECE profession.

The assertion points to a need for the government and institutions of higher learning to collaboratively introduce programmes and structures that would attract more men into early childhood profession.

4. Data presentation analysis and Discussion

This study explores the absence of male-educators' representation in Early Childhood Care Education and the strategies that could be used to solve the problem. The researcher analysed the literature on the phenomenon. Three themes that emerged from the literature are; reasons for poor male educators' representation in early childhood care education, the importance of the presence of male-educators in ECCD and strategies that could be used to increase the number of male representation in ECCD.

4.1 Why poor male educators' representation in ECCD

The literature-related finding related to the scarcity of male educators in ECCD is that traditional and social constraints/attitudes can be considered factors that negatively impact on the number of teachers in the preschool which leads to an excessive number of female teachers (Wu, 2023; Ceng & Luo, 2020; Brandes et al., 2015). For example, society prefers women teachers at ECCD because they believe they are more nurturing than men (Mathwasa & Sibanda, 2021). The implication of the finding is that men are considered incapable of taking good care of young children in ECCD. On the contrary, the literature also shows that male practitioners can provide alternative male role models who are safe, respectful, caring, and meet the needs of boys who come from female background families (Tembo, 2021; Xu, 2020). The assertion points to the understanding that some men could nurture young children and serve as role models to young boys. It can be inferred that both male and female teachers are equally important in ECCD.

Data also reveals that men fear of child abuse allegations from society (Zhai, 2017; Joseph and Wright, 2016). This implies that as compared to their female counterparts, male teachers are the prime suspects of child abuse. Society does not trust them around their children (Brownhill & Oates, 2017). On the contrary, some researchers have shown that some female teachers are also capable of abusing and physically punishing children, whilst male teachers could also treat children with love and care (Sun *et al.*, 2019; Brownhill & Oates, 2017). The observation points to the necessity of male teachers in ECCD.

Another finding from the review of literature is that male teachers who are already in the profession (ECCD) face challenges of society's negative perceptions of being suspects of homosexuals and pedophiles (Brown, 2018; Farquhar, 2017). Society considers them sexually abnormal therefore does not trust them to take good care of the children. Furthermore, men themselves consider ECCE as a low-status and low-paying career (Ceng & Luo, 2020; Joseph & Wright, 2016; Brandes et al., 2015). It can be deduced that men prefer a well-paying job that gives them prestige. Underpayment is another contributing factor that shows no respect for preschool teachers regarding men's choice of becoming preschool teachers so, they feel undervalued and underpaid (Wu, 2023; Brownhill & Oates, 2017; Dan, 2016 ; Brandes et al., 2015). That is, for men, the type of job goes together with payment and status but ECCD is not able to provide that at the moment.

4.2 Importance of male educators in ECCD.

The review of the literature revealed the importance of the inclusion of the male-teachers in ECCD as a finding. It demonstrates that male representation in ECCD is necessary for the cognitive development of the child because early childhood is an important time for children to acquire cognition regarding gender identity (Mathwasa & Lwazi, 2021; Callahan & Lucy, 2019; Tayler & Price, 2019). The finding implies that if the child grows up interacting with female teachers only, the child misses the masculine experience and exposure that would be gained from the male teachers. The absence of male teachers in the children's life denies them the opportunity to explore and identify themselves as males. The literature also shows that male teachers make up for the absence of male parents in some families (Tembo, 2021; Xu, 2020 & Graham, 2018; Zhang, 2017). Some games and activities in schools are male-oriented so some female teachers fail to take part but male teachers would put more emphasis on masculinity, instilling discipline and act as role models when learning material and activities associated with masculinity (Vuyiseka, 2022; Xu, 2019; Qian et al., 2016; Ternnoff, Nentwich, and Vogt, 2015). It can be deduced that ECCD is incomplete and imbalanced if there are no male teachers in the profession.

4.3 What could be done to improve male educators' representation in ECCD?

The literature reveals that there could be strategies that could be put in place to solve the challenge of poor male educators' representation in ECCD. Teachers need to be trained on how to carry out a gender analysis related to their work as that will help them treat both girls and boys with equal respect and even support every child to express ideas and participate fully in all activities (UNESCO). Training is always a perfect step towards solving the problem of insufficient numbers of male educators at ECCD. It will equip male teachers with skills for teaching and caring for female children at ECCD. Xu (2019) states that the government should take a lead in addressing the scarcity of men in early childhood classroom. The scholar further explains that the university as well should play a more active role in boosting enrolment of male participation in early childhood programmes. In essence, the scholar suggests that the government in collaboration with other stakeholders such as institutions of higher learning should devise means of recruiting and attracting more male teachers through clear structures and learning programmes. This is consistent with Vuyiseka's (2022) suggestion that the government should put in place programmes and formulate policies that would help eradicate gender bias and stereotypes in the ECCD sector. That is, the societal attitudes and constraints regarding male educators in ECCD should be dealt with. Another suggestion is that educational institutions should improve the salaries and conditions of male and females' teachers to attract more male teachers to the ECCE profession (Wu, 2023).

5. Conclusion

This study concludes that the poor representation of male educators in early childhood education is caused by traditional gender-stereotyped beliefs and attitudes that certain careers are associated with a particular gender. For example, early childhood education as a profession is associated with women because it is believed they are naturally caring and can therefore nurture children at that level better than their male counterparts. It also concludes that men who may want to join ECCD as a profession live in fear of public skepticism, allegations, suspicion, and lack of trust. Society views them negatively in terms of the possibility of abusing children. Men also consider the profession as a poor-paying job that has no status. It is for these reasons that men do not show any interest in the teaching of young children. However, the study has also concluded that some men can still join ECCD and perform well if they go under training on how to take care of female young children. Also, some women can still abuse and punish students badly, so it is ideal to have both men and women teachers in ECCD for children's complete cognitive and physical development because the two act as role models for each of the gender status. The study also concludes that the presence of the two sexes is requisite for balanced child development because they will each be able to relate to their gender. Finally, the study concludes that it is the responsibility of the society, government and institutions of teacher training to collaboratively come up with solutions to the problem.

6. Recommendations

The study recommends that governments should have clear structures to educate society to change their attitudes towards ECCD as a profession so that men would feel free to join it. Men should not live under scrutiny and public suspicion that they abuse children. Furthermore, the study recommends that the government and institutions of higher learning should collaboratively devise means of attracting male teachers into ECCD profession, for example, they could increase the salary payment at ECCD and have clear programmes.

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