Male Teachers and Gender Balance in Early Childhood Programs

Facing gender balance issues: our need for male teachers is critical

by Mark T. Bittner and Margaret H. Cooney

The issue of increasing male teachers in infant, toddler, preschool, and primary classrooms deserves serious consideration. Its importance can be argued from multiple perspectives, one of which is the need for gender balance in early childhood programs. This article discusses three reasons why early childhood administrators can improve program quality by recruiting male teachers and it describes institutional barriers that exist within the female-dominated early childhood profession.

Gender fair classroom environment

Dan, a male teacher in the 2/3 continuum class, sings with his students on a daily basis. The mother of one of his students shares with him that her son has changed his attitude about singing. She states that Dan’s enthusiasm for singing helped her boy feel comfortable with it.

Male teachers in early childhood classrooms can contribute to bringing about more gender balance in school settings. In time, the overall goal of a gender fair classroom can be achieved. One characteristic of a gender fair classroom is its affirmation of a range of behaviors that are acceptable for boys and for girls.

A barrier to creating gender fair classrooms is the stereotypical behaviors that are considered appropriate and inappropriate for children in the classroom. According to a study conducted by Hyun and Tyler (1999), preschool teachers’ descriptions of boys and girls indicated a high level of gender bias. Furthermore, the 121 study participants (only one of whom was male) often reinforced young children of both sexes for the traditional feminine behaviors rather than masculine behaviors. For example, the three most common adjectives used to describe boys were active, loud, and aggressive. For girls, the most common descriptors were quiet, talkative, and sensitive. Obedience rather than assertiveness was valued in all children.

There is some evidence, contrary to the above vignette, that male teachers reinforce rather than disrupt gender stereotypes in the field of education (Cunningham, 1999). Failure on the part of early childhood teachers to initiate change in expectations for children’s behavior may be the result of institutional bias toward socializing boys and girls into traditional societal roles (Levin, 1998). Still, the presence of male teachers in early childhood classrooms is a start toward changing the status quo. However, presence of male teachers in early childhood classrooms will not overcome this bias without purposeful, explicit change in how teachers of young children think about teaching and learning with diverse populations.

Changing the status quo extends to the career lattice for early childhood educators. Gender bias is an issue in teacher education programs that train early childhood professionals. Predominantly female students enroll in teacher education programs at the early childhood level. Therefore, male students experience many of the same issues as other minority populations in their college classes and field placements. Choice of texts, dominant perspectives expressed...
in class discussions, and chosen content often felt gender biased according to males in the Cooney and Bittner (2001) study. The paucity of male mentor teachers was an additional concern to them and the male students who had a male mentor commented on the positive influence in the teaching and learning process.

In order to raise awareness and promote change around issues of gender bias, early childhood teacher educators and administrators need to understand the change process within institutions. Some suggestions for how to implement systemic change will be presented in the conclusion of this article.

Male role figures in the classroom

Troy, the only early childhood student in a college class looks on the field placement sheet being passed around and thinks, “There’s a male primary teacher on the list... a guy!” Troy signs up for a practicum in Dan’s 2/3 classroom and is thrilled with the support he feels for his career choice.

The myth that women are nurturers and males are not was reported as a barrier for male teachers in early childhood classroom settings according to a study conducted by Cooney and Bittner (in press). The participants in this qualitative study were male students, teachers, and professors who were interested in discussing their experiences related to choosing a career in early childhood education. The male director of the campus children’s center was the facilitator for the group. Six categories of issues were identified by the participants.

Quality male teachers could boost program efforts to build a male friendly atmosphere in the early childhood setting that does not communicate a message that shuts men out. According to a study conducted by McBride and Rane (1997), many children from single parent families or with high-risk factors actually have regular contact with a father or a male role figure. A male teacher who encourages their presence in the classroom could help children and families connect home with school, thereby enhancing learning.

Creating a male friendly atmosphere in the classroom and school setting requires the school faculty and administration to study the messages their school culture communicates to fathers and male figures in children’s lives. Do images on the classroom walls show children interacting positively with men? Are there photos of children with family members that include male role figures? Do the children’s literature selections show males and females engaged in a wide range of activities? And most importantly, are there male teachers in the classrooms? One of the barriers to recruiting and retaining quality male teachers is the lack of male role models for them in their teacher education program field experiences and in the schools in which they are hired.

Worthy wages for early childhood educators

Dan complies with his father’s expectation to learn the electrician business by working with his father after graduation from the teacher education program. Dan’s wife tells him one day when he returns from work that she wants him to go back to teaching because he is a different person when he teaches. They return to the college community where Dan accepts the 2/3 position.

Dan states, “Teaching is my gift. I’m a different person when I teach.” As long as early childhood education remains a female dominated profession, the issue of worthy wages will be tied to gender bias and perpetuate the myth that woman’s work is less worthy than men’s work. The male focus group study revealed a public perception that teaching is easy with short hours and not as respected as other professions. One of the male study participants reminded the focus group that “Teachers are the most important person in our society. Doctors are important but they had teachers. Everyone had teachers.”

Worthy wages for early childhood professionals continues to be a pressing issue in the field and is a barrier to hiring quality teachers, both male and female. Males who wish to enter the teaching profession and who see themselves as the family’s breadwinner and able to provide the “material things” have a dilemma described by one male college student as, “I’m gonna have to sacrifice what I like for what I love.” The public perception that teaching is an easy job with summers off is a barrier to worthy wages for a respectable profession. Additionally, many male teachers have to overcome the negative influence of family and friends who discourage their career choice. Male teachers can contribute to overall early childhood program quality by helping to create a gender fair classroom climate, providing a nurturing male role figure in the classroom, and pushing for worthy wages.

Conclusion

Administrators, teachers, parents, and community members who wish to bring about a change in the early childhood profession from a female-dominated field to one that has more gender balance could work together to make meaningful change that positively impacts children’s lives. What would it take for male and female teachers to break out of the gender stereotyped expectations for children’s classroom behavior and begin to embrace a wider range of behaviors for both boys and girls that lead to a gender fair classroom?
Accomplishing change within any institutional setting, including early childhood programs, involves a clear vision and thoughtful, flexible implementation. Literature on the change process describes why reform fails and how to be an effective change agent. Fullan and Miles (1992) propose seven orientations that must be incorporated into program leaders’ and participants’ actions for successful change:

- Early difficulty must be conceptualized as an opportunity to learn and an ability to cope with uncertainty.
- The initial shared vision must be continuously shaped and re-shaped.
- Good coping means being active, assertive, and inventive in order to get to the root of the problem when that is needed.
- A willingness to search for and use extra resources and to ask for assistance is a sign of strength, not weakness.
- Managing change means effort must be spent on monitoring implementation, keeping everyone informed, linking with other change projects, identifying unsolved problems, and initiating clear coping action to find solutions.
- The system’s overall culture and its interrelated parts will be affected by the change and this must be acknowledged and actively assessed.
- Change involves local implementation by everyday teachers and cannot be dictated from the top down.

We believe that recruiting more quality male teachers into the early childhood profession is a place to start while at the same time addressing the institutional and societal barriers that resist the creation of gender fair early childhood classrooms.

References


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