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Differences? Similarities? Male teacher, female teacher: An instrumental case study of teaching in a Head Start classroom

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Exploratory study seeking gender differences in ECE teaching.
- Differences and similarities were found.
- Differences appear to be primarily a matter of personality.
- Similarities strengthened by program structures.
- Reasons given for men being needed in ECE teaching.

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ABSTRACT

Male teachers are rare in early childhood education (ECE). Interest in increasing the number of male ECE teachers is often driven by essentialist assumptions about male teachers bringing something unique to classroom teaching by virtue of being men. To explore this assumption, the author conducted an instrumental case study of a team of Head Start teachers: one female, one male. Differences were found, but similarities between the two teachers were determined to be of much greater importance. Reasons for the findings are explored, and a brief argument is made for greater male teacher involvement in ECE classrooms based on other than essentialist grounds.

1. Introduction and issues

Across much of the world, particularly Europe and North America, concern is expressed over "gender imbalances" in teaching (Drudy, 2008, p. 309), particularly in early childhood education (ECE). In the US fewer than 3% of ECE teachers are male. Norway has been most successful recruiting men to ECE teaching, having reached only 9% male ECE teachers (Vandenbroeck & Peeters, 2008, p. 704).

1.1. Causes and concerns

Reasons for the paucity of male teachers generally are linked to a range of issues: "economic development, urbanisation, the position of women in society, cultural definitions of masculinity and the [low social] value of children and childcare" (Drudy, 2008, p. 309). More specifically, low wages and social status and few opportunities for career advancement are believed to discourage male participation in teaching (Farquhar, 1998).

Gender stereotypes and expectations contribute. Women are widely thought to be natural caregivers (Martino & Rezai-Rashti, 2010; Timmerman & Schreuder, 2008), and the culture of early childhood education is commonly considered not to be male friendly (Ashcraft & Sevier, 2006; Nelson & Shikwambi, 2010; Sumison, 2000): "It is … assumed that the female culture, associated with the profession, may be one of the most important pull-factors that prevent men from joining the caring workforce" (Vandenbroeck & Peeters, 2008, p. 705). And finally, concerns among parents about teacher sexual orientation, that many male teachers may be homosexual, are believed to be troubling to heterosexual male teachers, who may feel they must be "super-heroes"

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(Farquhar, 2008, p. 737) to prove their masculinity (see Honig, 2008, pp. 682–683).

Concern about the paucity of male teachers raises a range of issues across the globe. Generally boys' school performance lags behind girls' performance on a wide range of measures from early reading to dramatic differences in college graduation rates. Reviewing the situation, Connell (1996) observed some years ago that "controversies about boys, men, and education have boiled up in a number of countries [worldwide]" (p. 206). As the boiling continued, a "growing consensus [emerged] that the presence of men as carers would benefit the child" (Vandenbroeck & Peeters, 2008, p. 703), although opinions differ about how children benefit or might benefit. An essentialist view of gender is common: that male teachers, simply by virtue of being men, are important for validating and channeling "boyish energy" into appropriate and "'normal' boy-behaviours [that are not] valued in school" (Mills, Martino, & Lingard, 2004, p. 361). Moreover, male teachers are expected to have special insight and understanding about what to do about boy's anti-social behavior. A common refrain is that boys desperately need more male role models. Yet there is considerable controversy over just what this claim means and what male roles specifically are or should be modeled.

Besides representing a deficit view of female teachers (Mills et al., 2004), such claims generally portray gender roles as settled when clearly they are not. As among many elements of identity, masculinity and femininity vary across cultures and contexts (Levant et al., 2003) so that the "meaning of masculinity in working-class life is different from the meaning in middle-class life, not to mention among the very rich and the very poor" (Connell, 1996, p. 208). Moreover, there is formidable variation within gender production and performance (Francis, 2008, 2010); and individual enactment spills out and over gender-constituting discourses (see Wilkins, 2012). Furthermore, the empirical claim that the mere presence of male teachers in classrooms is good for children runs head-on into a small but growing body of evidence that elements of the dominant conception of masculinity may even prove harmful to girls and boys, as well as offer an excuse for ineffective teaching (see Martino & Rezai-Rashti, 2010, p. 254).

1.2. Nature of "differences"

If there are recognizable differences between what male and female teachers do in ECE classrooms, what these differences are is not well understood and often simply assumed. Claims of difference based on teacher self-reports contribute to the problem. For example, in a Belgian study Vandenbroeck and Peeters (2008) reported how male teachers in ECE programs compared themselves to female teachers:

> [They are] more strict with the rules, engage more in physical and rough play with the children and make more use of humour. They did not consider this to be problematic but on the contrary they thought very positively about this diversity. They did not claim to be better carers than their female peers, just different, and they attached value to this diversity. (p. 709).

Rentzou and Ziganitidou (2009) reported similar findings: Although claiming to carry out the same activities,

> Greek male childcare workers stated that they prefer to give children the opportunity to move freely, to experiment, to run and to "revel," in contrast with their female co-workers who want, as males said, to "discipline" the children and are "square." (p. 277).

Lacking other data sources, these claims may or may not be accurate.

In contrast to teacher self-reports, studies drawing on other methodologies have produced different conclusions. For example, based on an analysis of children's drawings of their male Australian ECE teachers, Sumison (2005) concluded, "As far as these children are concerned, a very tentative answer to [the] question, 'Do men offer something different in their work with young children on account of their being men?' Would appear to be no" (p. 120).

The claim that male teachers are needed to motivate learning and model behavior for male students is challenged by findings of a British study of the performance of 11-year-old children in 413 separate classes taught by 113 male and 300 female teachers. Carrington, Tymms, and Merrell (2008) "found no empirical evidence to support the claim that there is a tendency for male teachers to enhance the educational performance of boys and, conversely, for female teachers to enhance the education performance of girls" (p. 321). As far as boys' behavioral issues are concerned, a Dutch study of primary school children concluded that generally "both female and male teachers seemed to experience special difficulties relating to boys" and that "the most conflictual relationships were found [to be] between boys and male teachers" (Spilt, Koomen, & Jak, 2012, p. 374).

2. The study

2.1. Design and guiding questions

An instrumental case study was chosen as the study design, as this design enables exploration of issues and testing of established points of view about these issues. It also enables identification of commonalities and differences within the boundaries defining a case. Stake (1995) described such case studies in this way:

> We have a research question, a puzzlement, a need for general understanding, and feel that we may get insight into the question by studying a particular case. … We may choose a teacher to study, looking broadly at how she teaches but paying particular attention to… [a particular aspect of her teaching]. … Case study here is instrumental to accomplishing something other than understanding this particular teacher, and we may call our inquiry *instrumental case study*. (p. 3)

This instrumental case study was focused on the instruction of a male/female team of Head Start teachers in a single classroom. As with all case studies, generally, instrumental cases have very limited generalizability. The intent is to fruitfully illuminate a complex issue or concern.

Two questions guided the study:

1.What cultural and biographical experiences tend to influence the gender identities of males and females who become ECE teachers?
2.Are there male-female teaching differences that emerge in the characteristic instructional patterns of an ECE classroom?

2.2. Setting

Head Start (HS) is the largest early childhood education program in the US. Locally operated but mostly federally funded, HS serves nearly 1 million 3–5-year-old low-income children and their families. Children are provided healthy meals and snacks as well as medical services, including hearing and eye exams. Additionally,