Genderism and Men in Childcare: Creating Equity in a Gendered Profession

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The New Gender-ism

Complicating any conversation about gender are recent indications that America is entering a new era in which women will dominate the landscape—academic and economic—creating a new inequality. Today, women represent "the majority of the workforce for the first time in U.S. history" (Rosin, 2010). Women now outnumber men in academic attainment (both B.A. and M.A. degrees), employment prospects, management and professional positions, and, according to Joel Hilliker, 2013, "among 20-somethings, women now have the edge in the wage gap."

How does this new gender-ism impact ECE? Is it possible that to some extent, a spirit of protectionism exists? Bryan Nelson, 2004, cites a survey of early education programs in Ohio which found "that center directors would not consider hiring a man without an early childhood degree even though they had hired women without degrees." Francis Wardle, 2008, likewise suggests that "this cultural conflict can result in men experiencing a sense of difference and isolation on a daily basis." But the gendered experience faced by men entering the ECE profession begins before their first interview. Ching-Sheue, emphasizes the role of professors and trainers, stating, "from the perspective of teacher trainers... it is difficult for trainers to discard the thought that females are leading preschool education. The difficulties males encounter, especially during course teaching, are no longer the problems of learning itself, but the possible social conceptions and learning trends of a different gender."

Gender-ism and ECE Teacher Responsibilities

Put two male teachers together in an infant- toddler or preschool classroom and count the hours until you receive a parent complaint. And yet, across the country, ECE classrooms and even entire programs, run exclusively by female staff, do not have this same experience with parent complaints. Paul Sargent, 2001, found that among the male teachers he interviewed, most had been subject to policies regarding the touching of children and being left alone with children that female teachers had not. Such discriminating policies certainly have ramifications for staffing, and may consciously or unconsciously weigh in hiring decisions related to male teachers.

In addition to formal policies, unstated expectations exist as well. Stuart Cleinman tells of his experiences:

> *"Having entered the field in 1975 as a Toddler Teacher and being the only male in the center for a few years, I found an interesting dynamic which I had to fight against. This was during the days that centers did not always have folks on staff to take care of facilities in the proper way or people were contracted and would come on occasion. So if something needed to be done, such as picking up a box that was delivered or a window that needed to be opened and there may be a problem with that, there was the expectation that I was going to do that task."*

Stories such as this are nearly universal among men in early education—and are the fodder for more than a few gripe-fests at the workshop sessions for men in ECE at national and state conferences. Through Cleinman's lense, we can see how the presence of men in a work environment can raise biases and assumptions about gender roles that even trained professionals may fail to recognize.

Gender-ism and Assumptions About Class

Certainly our society practices bias against women in a number of ways—politically, economically, socially and culturally. While this divide is closing, a lot of women will likely tell you that gender bias still exists broadly in American society.

Alan Guttman invites us to consider the impact of class, trust, status and gender in the following example: "Men and women in the medical profession are accorded a high level of trust and status when working with/treating/caring for young children." For this reason, parents would not typically express a concern about the gender of the physician or nurse examining their child.

Yet in ECE, the matter of gender and assumptions about class can become divisive issues as we seek to advocate for gender equity. For men actively involved in workshops that have addressed the matter of men in ECE, it is not uncommon to hear "If more men were preschool teachers we might make more money" or "If the pay was better, we might get more men in the profession." These are troubling remarks that dishonor the service and sacrifice of female teachers. Progressive male leadership in ECE has long acknowledged the tremendous disrespect shown to female preschool teachers who arrive at work every day, with a positive attitude, and give their best to the children in their class. When wages are kept low—women especially are undervalued for the work they do. The statements about men entering the field and driving up wages suggests a gender-class assumption that due to the low wage structure in ECE in general, men won't enter the field because they are incapable of the same dedication to children as women demonstrate by working for low wages (e.g. women will work for low wages and still be dedicated, but men are not culturally conditioned to do this so they choose a different field). Our assumptions prevent us from reaching out to (the next generation of young men), from inviting them into the ECE college classroom, or recruiting them from among the high school volunteers looking for community service opportunities.

Furthermore, as Cameron, 2001, points out, there are also assumptions related to men and class of "expectations that they will aspire to managerial roles... and senior positions." Basically, this notion is that men who enter ECE really just have designs to leave the classroom and enter a management position and that men can and do enjoy better economic status than their female colleagues. This sentiment is echoed by Sumsion, 1999, who refers to the "glass elevator" and its associated resentment. (The "glass elevator" referring to men entering a profession with the objective of moving into management and being on a fast-track to do so ahead

Some Statistics

Paul Sargent, in his 2001 book, Real Men or Real Teachers?, found that only 3% of K-3 teachers out of his sample of 2,002 were men. While an impressive 42% of secondary school teachers are men (Nelson, n.d.), the percentage of male teachers cascades downward: 9-16% of elementary school teachers (Kent, 2007), (Cox, 2008) down to an abysmal 2.3% of preschool and kindergarten teachers (Nelson, n.d.).

Sadly, in the current trends toward growing gender equity, male Pre-K and Kindergarten teachers made the least gain in share of employment (compared to other highly gendered professions from 2005 Bureau of Labor statistics).



of their female colleagues). This appears to be bourn out by research in the mid 1990s on primary teachers. Significantly, there is some indication that this very possibility has a negative impact upon their professional colleagues, who in some cases may view men as "transient workers" (Cameron, 2001). In the extreme, this may cause women to view their male counterparts with some suspicion and envy. This is particularly true given the horizontal organizational structure of early care and education. The profession already holds few opportunities for career advancement (Cameron, 2001), so the competition for those management positions is more intense. These issues are interesting to ponder and debate—what discourages women from inviting more men into the ECE field? And what discourages men from entering the field in the first place?

Gender-ism and Heterosexism, Homophobia, and Pedophilia

It is often assumed that men choosing to work with young children are gay. This is troubling on many levels. It is troubling that it is often assumed that "nurturing" and "maleness" are incompatible. It is even more troubling that sexual orientation is mentioned at all. It would be like seeing a female construction worker and immediately considering her sexual orientation, as if that might have some impact upon her ability to perform the job. Men—straight, gay, or none-of-your-business—enter the early care and education profession because they, like most of their colleagues, want to make a difference in their community and in the lives of children and families. It is also because they respect and enjoy the culture of childhood. Sensational, yet exceedingly rare stories such as the McMartin case in the Los Angeles South Bay and the Sandusky case at Penn State have effectively stigmatized all men who work with children, thereby confusing a healthy and appropriate appreciation for nurturing activities, with sexual deviancy or inappropriately self-gratifying intent. There is a perfect storm created by a western culture unaccustomed to (perhaps even suspicious of) men wanting to work with children, paired with an early childhood culture rooted in nurturing touch, play, and caregiving routines.

When parents remark on the merits of male teachers, they often cite stereotypically male behaviors among those they value. Sargent, 2001, includes in this list of traditional attributes, an "interest in athletics... (being) a disciplinarian... (and being) an authority figure." Such stereotypical expectations for masculinity impose limits on the diverse representations of masculinity that men can offer. Sargent, 2005, recognized the limits to such traditional or stereotypical assumptions regarding the role modeling value that men might bring to the classroom. Frequently, these assumptions place men in ECE in the position of executing this "hegemonic performance" of masculinity for the benefit of boys in particular (Sargent, 2005). Meaning that men find it necessary to exhibit more stereotypical "male" behaviors in order to be accepted and trusted in the ECE environment.

Paul Sargent, 2001, describes the conflated symbolic status ascribed to men who choose to work with children as "a hybrid of at least two symbolic statuses: homosexual male and child molester." Sargent, 2001, goes on to suggest that "many of the behaviors male teachers adopt are intended to distance themselves from this symbolic status." I am astounded by the number of times (male) presenters (at early education conferences) immediately mention wife and children (and yes, even I have been guilty of this).

It is as if we need to clarify our sexual orientation before we can even begin to present our information. At one National Association for the Education of Young Children conference, the tension between the GLBTQ and Men in Child Care groups was such that an impromptu meeting was held between the two focus groups. Barbara Reskin, states, "... negative constructs such as 'homosexual' and 'pedophile' ... are used to help structure the gendered nature of teaching" (Sargent, 2001). Indeed, "the social construction of homophobia acts as a ritualized mechanism of social control, especially since it has been conveniently and erroneously conflated with pedophilia" (Sargent, 2001). This association "In an inclusive profession that serves a diverse population of children and families, sexual orientation has no place in determining the appropriateness of a person to be a teacher of young children." ~Bryan Nelson, 2004

This assumed connection between maleness and pedophilia has far reaching and subliminal impact upon the training of early educators. Gilbert and Williams, in their 2008 study looking at gender and "depictions of touch in early childhood textbooks" found that even within the quality textbooks that were analyzed, photos which depicted men touching children were highly under- represented. Interpret the meaning of this as you choose. Peeters, 2007, clearly agrees, stating, "we should not accept early childcare and education services that are based on one single identity—be it gender, culture or ethnicity."

Final Thoughts

Undoubtedly, women hold some privilege within the ECE profession. While women may experience economic inequity based upon their low wages, and perhaps experience other gender bias outside the classroom, within the classroom a woman's lived experience carries little of the burden of a man in ECE. Her male counterpart, enduring the same class oppression of his chosen profession, is also weighed down by the bias society has against men in nurturing roles. Outside the classroom, the male ECE teacher is faced with defending his career choice, or (not unheard of) even avoids mentioning his profession at all to friends and family. In the classroom, the male teacher is living an experience of suspicion related to complex political and social relationships between gender and his chosen profession. Furthermore, in this negotiation of inclusiveness, we must recognize that the performance of masculinity itself takes on diverse characteristics. It is simply not sufficient to say that I am a male preschool teacher. To loosely borrow from Carastathis, (2008), I must, in living this experience, become a man for male preschool teachers.

~ Greg Uba

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