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# SUPPORTING MEN AS EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATORS



“When we hear the word ‘diversity,’ let’s begin to include gender as part of that definition.”<sup>1</sup>  
— Bryan Nelson, founder and director, MenTeach.org

Visit any elementary school or early learning center in the U.S. and you are likely to find a common scenario: Women teaching the students or taking care of the children. Getting men in the classroom to instruct, inspire and care for young children is not a new challenge, but one that may have new solutions if our society can flip the script on long-held biases toward men in these roles.

From sideways glances from parents at school to incredulous reactions in social situations (“You work where?!”), some treat male early childhood educators with curiosity or suspicion.<sup>2</sup> This white paper explores the barriers that men face in gaining employment in early childhood education settings and how encouraging men to be in these roles benefits the workforce, our children and our social fabric.

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## WE’VE COME A LONG WAY, MAYBE

Today, there is wider acceptance of most jobs being done by both men and women. For more than a century in the U.S., physicians were men; women simply didn’t perform that role. Elizabeth Blackwell changed that in 1849 by being the first woman to graduate from medical school. By 2018, more women were applying to medical school than men.<sup>3</sup>

Like medicine, education is a field where there is no such thing as “too many qualified people,” yet the doors are still ajar at best, and closed at worst, for men who want to educate and care for young children.

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## THE ECONOMICS AND SOCIAL STANDING

It’s no secret that those in teaching generally, and in early childhood education specifically, experience low pay. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the median pay for preschool teachers in May 2018 was just under \$30,000 per year.<sup>4</sup> Depending on where a person lives and whether he or she lives in a household that has another income, that number can be a deal breaker.

By comparison, the median pay for middle school teachers was \$58,600—nearly twice that of preschool teachers. This disparity can discourage many qualified people of both genders from entering or remaining in early childhood education.

“You shouldn’t have to take a vow of poverty to be a preschool teacher,” said Kitt Cox, the

director of Birth to Three Family Center in Ipswich, Massachusetts. “But, as a group, we’re too nice to push back.”<sup>5</sup>

At the same time, even though women have increased their presence in higher-paying jobs traditionally held by men, women as a whole continue to be overrepresented in lower-paying occupations.<sup>6</sup> This reality can make it difficult for men to see those professions as viable options financially.

Similarly, the rate of pay reflects how teaching and childcare in general are low in the pecking order of respected professions. This presents its own challenge in terms of recruiting men who have career ambitions that may exceed what they believe a role in a school or an early learning environment can offer.

“I think there are many advantages to having men in early childhood settings,” said a female educator from Arizona. “First of all, it lends a certain sense of respect to the position, especially among male students. And if more men got into the field, the pay would go up.”<sup>7</sup>

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## SOCIAL ACCEPTANCE

Stereotypes and biases present another barrier to men choosing early childhood education as a career path.

One male teacher explained, “At a family wedding, I was asked my profession and mentioned that I teach pre-K. My interlocutor nearly choked on her champagne, and then bluntly asked, ‘Why would a man want to teach young kids?’”<sup>8</sup>

**“I’ve been told straight to my face that ‘We don’t hire men.’”**

Society has moved on, yet the early childhood workforce seems stuck in the 1970s model of the family, explained James Taylor, a former educator and now a family care specialist who assists early childhood centers for the Tennessee Early Childhood Training Alliance. “After 15 years in the field,” he said, “I still get some interesting questions about what I do.”<sup>9</sup>

For Taylor, just getting into early childhood education after 11 years in manufacturing was an uphill climb. When his company moved outside the country, he decided to make a drastic change in careers. Since he

had tutored children in the past, he told his case worker with the Trade Adjustment Assistance Program that he wanted to teach young children. “She said, ‘I don’t think we’re going to approve

that.’ But I pleaded, ‘Let me try,’ and I got approved,” Taylor said.

Once Taylor finished his education, he still had to convince employers that he was the right person for the job. “I’ve been told straight to my face that ‘We don’t hire men,’” he said.<sup>10</sup>

For those who are hired, some can find themselves being pushed out of the classroom and into administration, or gravitating toward other areas due to the increased pay, among other reasons. The tendency for women to teach and men to manage is a deeply rooted form of sexism in education.<sup>11</sup>

Consider the experience of Glenn Peters, a pre-K teacher in New York City. He realized he was entering a woman-dominated field,

but it was brought into stark relief when he was at a résumé-building session for prospective pre-K teachers.<sup>12</sup> “I knew I was the only man who attended it, because they couldn’t find the bathroom code for the men’s bathroom,” he said.

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## THE ISSUE OF TRUST

Even parents who consider themselves open-minded and accepting with regard to gender can be caught off guard when they see a man working in an early childhood setting. Some are better than others at containing their surprise, or even outright suspicion. Their reaction can reverberate, causing male educators to feel anxious about their roles and guarded in their interactions with kids.

Steven Antonelli, who has taught preschool in New York City for 20 years, said, “You can see sometimes that parents would come in and say, ‘What’s this? This guy’s going to be teaching my child?’ You have to develop a relationship with parents so that they understand and trust you.”<sup>13</sup>

While forming relationships with parents is ideal and could help them feel more comfortable with a male teacher or caregiver, this may be difficult to do, as some people simply have not warmed to the idea of men caring for and educating young children.

A study from the National Association for the Education of Young Children revealed that men are viewed differently than their female counterparts in the classroom, particularly when it comes to any physical interactions they may have with the students—even hugs.<sup>14</sup> When asked why more men do

not enter the field, one study participant explained, “A lot of these guys now don’t want to teach because of all the bad things that are happening. They don’t want to teach the little kids.”

When male educators attempt to express affection for young children, they may face scrutiny and suspicion that puts their livelihoods and reputations at risk.

“Being a male in the field is difficult because of so many stigmas,” says Joseph Noland, an assistant preschool teacher in Flint, Michigan. “But we genuinely care for these kids. We would do anything to keep them safe. When these kids are learning and to see them finally get something, it makes it so worthwhile.”<sup>15</sup>

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## IS THE TIDE TURNING?

Since the 1970s, the percentage of men working in early care and education has ranged from 2.1 percent to 5.9 percent of the total early childhood workforce. The early childhood community paid attention in 2018, therefore, when the number of men in the field reached 6.3 percent.<sup>16</sup>

“There seems to be a shift that more men want to work with young children and that we may be seeing a change in attitudes,” says Bryan Nelson, director of MenTeach, a nonprofit devoted to boosting the number of men in education. “This means that parents are more likely to see a man caring for their baby or young child now.”<sup>17</sup>

According to *Psychology Today*, gender-integrated care environments are better for children. In addition to children seeing that caring is part of masculinity as well

as femininity, they can experience an environment that resembles the one into which they are being socialized.<sup>18</sup>

Male teachers also serve as role models who play a vital role in boys' development and growth, according to Royston Maxwell Lytle, principal of a charter school in Washington, DC, whose population is 98 percent African American.<sup>19</sup>

"I feel it is important for students to find someone they can see themselves in, look up to and aspire to be," he says.

With that in mind, programs nationwide are inspiring young black men to enter the early childhood field. In Illinois, for example, Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel has pushed for universal pre-K. To ensure full staffing, a group of state educators created the Men of Color program, which combines coursework toward a certificate or two-year degree with paid internships and mentoring.<sup>20</sup>

Other programs working toward this goal include<sup>21</sup>:

- **"Call Me MISTER® (Mentors Instructing Students Toward Effective Role Models)"—Clemson, South Carolina:** A teaching and recruitment scholarship program that offers tuition assistance (loan forgiveness programs) and academic, cultural and social support to male students enrolled in participating colleges.<sup>22</sup>

- **Leading Men Fellowship, a Washington, DC-based program that has expanded to Baltimore; Richmond, Virginia; Kansas City, Missouri; Springfield, Massachusetts; and Milwaukee.** The program draws young black men into the early childhood field by offering formal training in child development and a yearlong internship in a single childhood setting so they can build relationships with educators and children. In addition, the fellows meet once a month for professional development sessions and mentoring.<sup>23</sup>

**"I feel it is important for students to find someone they can see themselves in, look up to and aspire to be."**

Programs like these have helped people like Billy Hubbert, a high school graduate who had been driving for Lyft and substituting in a private childcare center.

"I can count on one hand the number of male teachers I had growing up," he said. "The [Men of Color] program helps me feel like I'm not in a silo. I'm not all by myself."<sup>24</sup>

But even with training, many men are not fully prepared for the tender ties they form with children, who seem to crave their affection and attention. "They tell you the kids will get attached to you," De'Anthony Lee-Alexander, a Milwaukee fellow, recalled. "But then you're actually in a classroom and a kid says they love you, and you're like 'Whoa.' It's such a good feeling."<sup>25</sup>

Another way that men can train for a career in early childhood care and education, as well as increase their credibility with parents and the field, is by earning a



Child Development Associate® (CDA) Credential™, administered by the Council for Professional Recognition, a Washington, DC, association that promotes improved performance of professionals in the field. Thanks to the requirement that credential earners complete 120 hours of coursework and 480 hours of experience working with children, the CDA® builds competency.

“It’s almost impossible to pay back college loans,” according to Patrick Frueh, a technical assistance specialist at Action for Children in Columbus, Ohio, and a professional development specialist who assesses CDA Candidates for the Council. “The CDA, on the other hand, offers a cost-effective way to get the skills you need,” Frueh said, “and the greater ROI [return on investment] might encourage more men to get into the field.”

Proactive recruiting programs also would help, especially when young men are still in high school or college, along with financial incentives and more programs to raise awareness of the need for male teachers.

Encuentros Teacher Academy at California State University San Marcos, for example, brings high school students together with Hispanic education leaders to introduce teens to the possibility of becoming teachers themselves. Pat Stall, director of the School of Education at CSU San Marcos and one of the creators of the program, said that while there were only 11 student participants during the first year of the program in 2017, she expected up to 30 to participate the following year because of recruitment by the recent participants. One participant, when discussing his own experience of having a Latino male teacher for the first time, said, “When I walked into my teacher’s classroom, I feel welcomed and accepted.”<sup>26</sup>

“Providing a diverse staff offers more options for children to find a teacher to relate to and be inspired by,” said Nelson.<sup>27</sup>

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