

Perceptions of Male Educators: Contradictions in the Work Field

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Abstract

This article explores a variety of published research that reports on perceptions of male educators and contradictions in the work place. The articles cited in this research are used to identify perceptions men face as male educators on a day to day basis and how these perceptions lead to other contradictions between colleagues in the work place. These perceptions are preventing male educators from effectively teaching young minds and providing a service that is seen as highly qualified by administration. Male educators are stereotypically seen as positive role models, future administrators, and professionals who always have the male advantage by society. This research is vital to help address the important issues affecting female and male educators from effectively collaborating with one another. It also gives educators the awareness needed to explore the important issue that will help promote a positive work environment. Regardless of gender, both females and males have the abilities to be successful educators. However, both females and males face contradictions towards one another that prevent a positive work atmosphere. Yet, through all these perceptions and contradictions, this article will determine if male educators are perceiving gender as a primary force in their teaching profession.

Keywords: perceptions, contradictions, male educators, education, gender perspectives

1. Introduction

In 2006, the National Education Association noted that the number of male teachers in the public school classrooms had fallen to a 40-year low (National Education Association, 2006). With a higher concentration of male teachers in secondary education, elementary schools are finding harder than ever to higher effective male educators for their schools (Cook, Knorr, & Medford, 2013).

In their analysis, Fordice and Nielsen (2013) reported that in the 2002-2003 school year, 88% of U.S elementary teachers were female. Also, male elementary teachers who enter the teaching profession for the first time are encountered with mixed messages. Society has given male educators unwritten rules that they must abide to when they are teaching their children. Male elementary teachers are constantly fighting perceptions and contradictions that are hindering their ability to be an effective teacher. While one main reason why men do not enter the teaching profession is due to a historical context. The bigger context revolves around sociological perspectives (Fordice & Nielsen, 2013).

Male educators as a whole are constantly fighting the perceptions and contradictions of other- whether these perceptions and contradictions come from parents, colleagues, administrators, or students. Society primarily sees male educators as role models, a breath of fresh air, an authority figure, and someone who has great potential to move up to administration solely based on their gender. Yet, are male educators perceiving gender as a primary force in their teaching profession?

2. Why Education

Within his study, Cruickshank (2012) discovered several motivating factors on why males want to become teachers. In fact, like females, the number one reason revolves around the desire to work with children and to make a difference in their lives. Other contributing factors focused on the idea of being a role model, contributing to society, and assisting children with a well-balanced education. Additionally, the majority of male educators within this study remembered one or more male teachers who had made important impacts in their lives as a student, often because the male student could relate better with his male teacher. Similarly, one of the most important factors for students to choose advanced education degrees was influenced by a positive role model or mentor during their kindergarten-twelve study.

Males choosing teaching as their career may also come to them later in life. More and more males are choosing education as a second career. An increasing number of men in North America are leaving businesses and taking

up teaching. These men are believed to be tired of “running the rat race” and trying to take control of an environment that is not following the expectations. Instead these men want to do something worthwhile and make a difference while serving society. This change in life is an opportunity for a challenge and an adventure (Cruickshank, 2012).

3. Perceptions, Perspectives, and Contradictions

Researchers have found that individuals who have strong perceptions and beliefs will also have strong indicators of the decisions they make through their lives (Bandura, 1986). Educators who have strong perceptions and perspectives towards teacher characteristics are likely to be influenced by their behaviors in the educational setting (Behrens, 1993).

In their case study, Fordice and Nielsen (2013) investigate contradictions male elementary teachers encounter in the elementary teaching profession. Stereotypically, men are perceived as positive role models in an elementary setting. School districts are constantly looking for knowledgeable male educators to add to their school. However, men in the elementary setting are constantly asking themselves if they are being too nurturing and empathetic towards children. Male elementary educators often wonder if their gender is being judged based on their over nurturing of a child in regards to working in a female-dominated work field.

Within their study, Fordice and Nielsen (2013) focus their findings around four contradictions. Their first contradiction focuses on the idea that men are putting themselves in a female world. Through research it has been proven that there are more female elementary teachers than male. Yet, men who enter the elementary profession have this “male advantage” given to them through societal stereotypes. When Fordice and Nielsen interviewed a male elementary teacher, they found the complete opposite findings. Typically men feel isolated and misunderstood within a “female” profession. “An awareness of gender discourse can better prepare men for the contradictions and conflicts they may face as they manage their masculinity in an occupation built upon the assumption that works will draw from discourses of femininity” (Nielsen, 2006, p. 5).

While some perceive male educators as role models, the second contradiction focuses on the idea that a role model can also associate with being a threat. Through Fordice and Nielsen’s (2013) research, men in the elementary field rarely give hugs, but rather give high fives or handshakes. Male educators constantly question whether or not lap sitting will be seen as nurturing or inappropriate. There is an evident anger and frustration with how society limits the quality of a male’s interactions with children based solely upon their gender.

Despite the fact that men are constantly celebrated for becoming elementary teachers, society implicitly encourages them to move into other careers. Typically, men do not stay in the elementary classroom for very long. The last contradiction focuses on the idea that men are being pulled in just as fast as they are being pulled out of the elementary classroom. Additionally, the number one reason why men leave the elementary field is because of gender-based tension. Many expect to see male educators move up the education ladder and working in administration. Yet, these contradictions are also what push men out of the education field all together (Fordice & Nielsen, 2013).

In his study, Wood (2012) examined a variety of research that focuses on the analysis of gender-based differences among elementary school teachers. In his mixed-methods study, Wood discovered ways male teachers are perceived by female teachers and ways female teachers are perceived by male teachers. While some of the results in this study still remain unclear and contradictive, there was one result that showed significant evidence. The vast majority of female educator’s agreed that there is a need for male elementary teachers in the work field.

For this study, Wood (2012) conducted an online survey to gather data. The questions asked in this survey solicits responses by asking closed-ended and open-ended questions to allow for a qualitative inquiry and quantitative measurement in the study. Out of a total of 217 participants, only 25 of them were male teachers. While this number may affect the accountability of the study, a thorough analysis of teachers’ perceptions were still conducted. This study explored teachers’ perceptions of female and male colleagues’ effectiveness.

In the conclusion of this research, Wood (2012) discovered that male elementary teachers are perceived by their female colleagues. While Wood deemed this result unclear, it could be based on a female’s bias based on their negative perceptions of male educators. Similarly, Wood discovered that the majority of participants in the study felt that there are differences between female and male teachers. In regards to a teachers’ ability to serve as a role model, more than half of the teachers surveyed felt that each gender is essentially the same. Although women are stereotypically seen as more nurturing and caring and men are stereotypically seen as authoritative, neither group

(male/ female teachers) perceived gender as an effective tool to be a role model.

3.1. Desire to Work with Children

More participants felt that male elementary teachers have a less desire to work with children in the education than females. Adapted from “Teacher Perceptions of Gender-Based Differences Among Elementary School Teachers,” by D. Wood, 2012, *International Electronic Journal of Elementary Education*, 4, p. 327.

	The female teachers I have worked with have a desire to work with children.		The male teachers I have worked with have a desire to work with children.	
	(n)	(%)	(n)	(%)
Strongly Agree	124	57.94	100	46.08
Agree	80	37.98	99	45.62
Neither Agree nor Disagree	10	4.67	14	6.45
Disagree	0	0.00	3	1.38
Strongly Disagree	0	0.00	1	0.46

Additionally, Wood (2012) found that the differences between female and male elementary teachers will remain unclear in many areas. “Collecting teachers’ perceptions of their colleagues and fully analyzing such data may lead educators’ to a better understanding of why there are so few male elementary teachers” (Wood, 2012, p. 320). This statement focuses on the idea that school districts should constantly be aware of contradictions and perceptions male and female educators have toward one another. If negative, these unclear perceptions may lead to tensions and frustrations between staff and ultimately hurt the students’ right to be effectively educated.

4. In Their Shoes

To begin her research, Mitrano (2014) thought about the men she knew who were elementary school teachers and wondered how they might perceive caring and gender in their work field. Mitrano choose two male educators for her study that taught in a charter school setting. She interviewed the men four times over a period of several months. As stated in her research, “the tensions and contradictions (surrounding men and teaching) offer us a point of entry for greater understanding, and the possibility of change” (Mitrano, 2014, p. 309).

The two men described in this research teach fourth grade and second grade. Each participate has more than 10 years of service as an educator. Mitrano started her research off with a list of questions. The first question asked why the two men wanted to become an elementary teacher. Similarity, the two men gave similar answers. Each educator had previous background working with children in various volunteering positions. They both indicated that they were happy to make a difference in a child’s life (Mitrano, 2013).

Although men are perceived different based on gender. Male educators do not have gender on the forefront of their mind. While men are valued at the elementary level and seen as a “breath of fresh air” it does not correlate with their perceptions as educators. “I don’t consider gender to be relevant to what I do with the children in my classroom. I see no difference in our teaching that I would ascribe to gender” (Mitrano, 2013, p. 314).

One perception that did come up in this study surrounded around the idea that male educators need to be a positive role model to the children, especially young boys. In much literature about men and elementary school teaching, the idea of men being a role model is discussed over and over again. Yet, throughout this literature, no one ever explains what this actually means in terms of behavior of the educator in the classroom. How does an educator, regardless of gender, become a positive role model in the classroom?

4.1. Role Models

Educator’s negativity rate male teachers as role models, yet society constantly praises them for being a male role model within the elementary classroom. Adapted from “Teacher Perceptions of Gender-Based Differences Among Elementary School Teachers,” by D. Wood, 2012, *International Electronic Journal of Elementary Education*, 4, p. 326.

	The female teachers I have worked with effectively serve their students as role models.		The male teachers I have worked with effectively serve their students as role models.	
	(n)	(%)	(n)	(%)
Strongly Agree	97	44.91	100	46.30
Agree	97	44.91	95	43.98
Neither Agree nor Disagree	22	10.19	14	6.48
Disagree	0	0.00	7	3.24

5. Conclusion

As a society, when will we move past the idea that education should no longer be a male versus female environment? While there are positive benefits from both genders in the education setting, the idea of being a positive role model stems from both sides of the spectrum. Rather than focusing on which male educator will make the best role model for children, focus on what kind of role model do we want to teach young children?

“Female teachers expressed a desire to have male colleagues who would be good listeners, team workers with a sense of humor, and not arrogant” (Wood, 2012, p. 320). It is interesting to understand the requirements female teachers have when wanting a male educator in their school. Yet, nowhere in their requirements does it say to have a male educator that will educate and make a difference in a child’s education to help better their future.

“How might our society change if we believed that men can be just as caring with young children as women” (Mitrano, 2013, p. 320)? If we extend beyond on what is just good for young children and focus on what is good for the larger society, these perceptions and contradictions could be a thing of the past. In the 19th century, men were discouraged from even thinking about being an educator. Elementary teaching has long been considered a woman’s job. A great place to start thinking about the future is to think about how far a society has come from the past. Perceptions and contradictions are becoming less in the forefront of people’s thoughts. Rather than male versus female educators, some are starting to think of it as human versus human.

While there is a need for male educators, research shows it is evident that male educators do not perceive themselves based on how society perceives them in the education work field. These perceptions and contradictions are not justifying their ability to educate young minds and how to create a better future tomorrow. Educators have the ability to work towards a better future. Through more research and awareness of gender perceptions, educators will have the ability to affectively work together to meet the common goal of helping all students be successful.

“I am not a male role model. I am a role model who happens to be male” (Mitrano, 2013, p. 316). This quote reflects the research that neither a male or female educator has superior significance over one another in a child’s education. If a teacher, regardless of gender, is passionate about their job, their students will succeed.

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