

An Investigation of Similarities and Differences between Perceptions of Male and Female Teachers in the Elementary Grades

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Abstract

There has been a renewed interest in the role and impact of male teachers on students in elementary schools. The purpose of this study was to gain perspectives of teachers toward males who teach in the elementary grades. The study followed a mixed method (quantitative and qualitative) research design. A combination of convenient and snowball sampling techniques were employed to obtain a sample of 20 participants (current and former elementary education teachers). Participants responded to an online survey using a 5-point Likert scale. An Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) and a t test for independent samples ($p < .05$) were used to determine statistical significance. An ANOVA found that no statistically significant difference existed between the perspectives of participants by ethnicity. The t-test revealed a statistically significant difference existed between the participants' perspectives on statements regarding equitable treatment of students. Likewise, the t-test found a statistically significant difference between the perspectives of Title 1 and Non-Title 1 teachers on statements regarding collegiality of male and female teachers. The qualitative analysis revealed that more than three-fourths of the participants said that there was a need for more male role models in the elementary school setting. Another theme noted in the qualitative analysis was that most respondents believed that male and female teachers could fill all job positions (classroom teachers, administrators, physical education teachers, custodians, office staff, etc.) in primary education professions. The researcher came to three conclusions following analyses and discussions of the data. First, gender stereotypes are still prevalent in the perceptions of male and female teachers in elementary schools. Secondly, more male teachers are needed in elementary school settings to provide students with a positive male role model. Finally, there is still a need for further research on the impact of male teachers on students in elementary schools.

Keywords: Perceptions, Male Teachers, Elementary Education

1. Introduction

Feminization of primary schools began in the 1840's when Horace Mann encouraged the growth of the common school. The Littleton School Committee believed women were naturally suited to care for children and could do so for one-third of the cost of a man⁵. Currently, there are fewer males than females in the early childhood profession. For example, The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) in the United States listed in the school year of 2011 to 2012, 76% of teachers were female⁸. This imbalance of males to females could potentially lead to different perceptions of males and females as teachers¹¹.

Common perceptions of males in early childhood education include: male role model, non-masculine (homosexual), pedophile, and disciplinarian. These perceptions created many advantages and disadvantages in the early childhood education field. The disadvantages males face (non-masculine and pedophile) limit teacher to student relationships², perhaps due to the fear of others misinterpreting their interactions. In contrast, female teachers do not face as much

scrutiny when they “touch” children. These differences in perceptions and behaviors of male and female teachers could contribute to how people view male and female as teachers.

As a male pre-service teacher I am curious to see how society views the gender of their teachers. I want to give my future students the best education and as many opportunities as I can for them to grow and succeed. A further insight on how my gender could potentially enhance or limit my relationships with my students will help me become a better teacher and provide me the ability to help my students. The purpose of this study, *An Investigation of Similarities and Differences between Perceptions of Male and Female Teachers Regarding Male Teachers in the Elementary Grades*, was to explore how male and female teachers are perceived in early childhood education classrooms according to role models, classroom management, and student interactions.

2. Literature Review

The early childhood profession was dominated by female teachers since the Common School Era in the early 1800's⁵. Due to this phenomenon, perceptions of male teachers and female teachers have differed. Stigmas for male teachers have revolved around pedophilia. On a whole males were seen as weaker teachers when compared to their female counterparts². On the contrary, women are seen as natural care givers and women do not face the same scrutiny in day-to-day interactions with children. These stereotypical perceptions of male and female teachers are created through the interactions that teachers have with themselves, colleagues, administration, parents of students, and pupils. During the review of literature, three major themes were found about the perception of male and female teachers in early childhood education. These themes included; role models, classroom management, and pedophilia. These themes were used to analyze the similarities and differences male teachers and female teachers experience in their occupation.

2.1. Role Models

The United States, Australia, Canada, England, Scotland, Finland, and some other countries have voiced concern over elementary school boys' underachievement academically³. The solution for this underachievement in many countries was to increase the number of male teachers in primary schools to serve as role models for boys. However, Carrington et al.³, found there is “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 educational performance of girls.” Cooney & Bittner⁴, on the other hand, discussed that some students need a male teacher, rather than a female teacher, to be able to succeed academically.

When building a role model for children, characteristics that children want to emulate in their teachers vary. In Hutchings et al.⁷ study of 142 children in London, England, girls wanted their teachers to be “nice, kind, generous, and helpful.” The study revealed boys wanted their teachers because of their “authority, knowledge, and intelligence.”⁷ These characteristics are closely related to societal gendered stereotypes. To break these gendered stereotypes, male and female teachers need to be aware of how their gender can influence their pupils and challenge the perception of gender in their classrooms.

2.2. Classroom Management

Female teachers are considered to be natural caregivers². This gendered stereotype has led students to give traits to female teachers such as nice and caring⁷. Male teachers are viewed as disciplinarians because strength is viewed as a major characteristic to masculinity⁶. Due to the label as a disciplinarian, male teachers most often have students in their classes with behavioral problems. In contrast, Woods¹¹, states that “men were also perceived positively as being more laid back.” These two different perceptions of male teachers in early childhood education could be contributed to the unbalanced ratios of male to female teachers.

Negative views on how males manage their classroom can be closely attributed to the low number of male teachers. Due to the limited number of males in early childhood education “it only takes a few ineffective ones to have a major impact on the stereotype of male teachers.”¹¹ In contrast, large numbers of female teachers in early childhood education could potentially cover up any ineffective female teachers in the field. Gendered stereotypes in early childhood education have influenced perceptions on how male and female teachers manage their classroom. This is because teachers try to emulate the behavior that is expected of them from administration, parents, and pupils¹.

2.3. Male Teachers & Student Interactions

Men in early childhood education have to constantly be aware of their interactions with students and how these interactions may be interpreted. Sargent⁹ described the situation as “walking on eggshells as they try desperately not to show the level of intimacy with the children that would be considered normal and ‘taken for granted’ for women.” When a male teacher displays feminine characteristics they can potentially be perceived as a pedophile. However, if males display more masculine traits, this may also be considered dangerous. Masculinity is closely related to violent, non-caring actions⁹. Finding a balance between masculine and feminine characteristics can pose potential problems for some male teachers.

With the delicate balance of what is considered acceptable interactions with students and what is not, limits male and student relationships. Cooney and Bittner⁴, described how male teachers felt uncomfortable when children would sit in their laps. This same concern was also described in a Bullough² article when the male teacher who was studied felt uncomfortable with giving students hugs and instead gave his students high fives. Cooney & Bittner⁴ suggested that to create stronger relationships with the students in the classroom, male teachers should build trust with every parent and child to prevent fears.

The investigator of this study explored how male and female teachers are perceived in early childhood education under three major themes discussed previously. Understanding the importance of these themes and how the gender of teachers relates to these themes will help future educators in their class. Analyzing these three themes can also contribute to the understanding of the underrepresentation of male teachers in early childhood education¹¹. In addition, understanding the perception of the gender of teachers can lead to improved teacher training and possibly the recruitment of more males to the early childhood education.

3. Methodology

As a future educator my primary goal encompasses helping my future students succeed. This involves educating the whole child and collaborating with the students’ parents, community, and other major influences in their lives. Being a male in a primarily female dominated profession can potentially cause either limitations in my process of educating students or enhance my relationships of educating my students. Gaining knowledge through this study on how my gender, as a male, could affect my students provided me with additional tools and skills necessary to enhance my future students’ success.

3.1. Participants

In the study, 20 participants completed the survey *Teacher Perceptions of Gender-based Differences Among Elementary School Teachers*¹¹. The participants consisted of current and former elementary school teachers from Central and East Texas. Of the 20 participants, 12 were female, seven were male, and one participant did not identify their gender. There were four African Americans that participated in the study and 16 Caucasians. Noted in Table 2, and Table 4, 14 participants had an education level of a Master’s degree or higher and half of the participants taught at least 13 years in elementary school.

Table 1. Years of Teaching Experience

	Frequency	Percent
1-4	5	25
5-8	3	15
9-12	2	10
13 or more	10	50
Total	20	100

Table 2. Level of Education

	Frequency	Percent
Bachelor's Degree	5	25
Specialist's Degree	1	5
Master's Degree	10	50
Doctoral Degree	4	20
Total	20	100

Due to the variance in demographics among the participants, the investigator assumed the “varied teacher experience provides rich descriptive, and meaningful data”¹¹. This rich and meaningful data helped to inform the current study. Demographics, including age and grade level in which the participant was currently teaching, are presented in Table 3 and Table 4.

Table 3. Age of Participants

	Frequency	Percent
22-27	2	10
33-38	7	35
39-44	3	15
45-older	7	35
Total	19	100

Note: One participant did not acknowledge their age.

Table 4. Grade Level Currently Teaching

	Frequency	Percent
Kindergarten	0	0
First Grade	5	25
Second Grade	3	15
Third Grade	1	5
Fourth Grade	0	0
Fifth Grade	1	5
Other	10	50
Total	20	100

3.2. The Survey

The survey instrument was presented electronically to participants through email. The survey, *Teacher Perceptions of Gender-based Differences Among Elementary School Teachers*, was created by Dr. Woods in 2012. The survey used a mixed-method approach utilizing a Likert Scale (Strongly disagree, disagree, neutral, agree, strongly agree) for quantitative analysis and an open-ended question section for qualitative analysis. Examples of questions from the quantitative section of the survey includes: *The female teachers I have worked with are nurturing and sensitive to their students* and *The male teachers I have worked with are nurturing and sensitive to their students*. An example of a question from the qualitative section of the questionnaire includes: *What differences, if any, are there between female and male elementary teachers?*

3.3. Validity And Reliability

Survey questionnaires are strong with reliability, but are weak with validity¹¹. To strengthen validity in the survey, Dr. Woods¹¹ used peer review analysis for qualitative data to establish trustworthiness thus strengthening reliability. Another process used to strengthen validity was the recognition of subjective views. Dr. Woods, who is a male researcher studying the perceptions of male and female teachers in elementary education, acknowledged that his gender could potentially influence the biasness of the survey. To combat any subjective questions, the survey was piloted with a group of current and former middle school and elementary school teachers. This step was meant to provide feedback for Dr. Woods to aid in the development of the survey.

4. Results & Analysis

4.1. Analysis Of Qualitative Data

The investigators analyzed the qualitative feedback from three open-ended questions using cogenerative dialoguing¹⁰. “The power of cogenerative dialoguing lies in the fact that all participants refer to the same set of events and that views and understandings of all participants are valued”¹⁰. Investigators jointly coded and analyzed the first five responses by asking themselves, “What does this mean” following an oral reading of each response. After coding the remainder of the responses independently, the investigators met and reread the participants’ responses collaboratively. The investigators focused on the research questions and either agreed to, extended, or disagreed with each other’s interpretation of the respondents’ feedback. When disagreements surfaced, each investigator explained his or her thinking which resulted in cogenerated understandings and explanations. When the same comments consistently recurred, coders combined comments to support categories. Similar categories were combined to form generalizations. Through continuous cogenerative dialoguing, coders reached 100% agreement regarding the meaning of the data (see Table 5). The investigators agreed that three overarching themes generated from the qualitative data. 1) Participants seemed to agree that more males are needed in the elementary school to teach and serve as role models. 2) Male and female teachers believed that both genders are appropriate for the same positions in the elementary school. 3) Management styles of female and male teachers seem to differ.

Table 5. Qualitative Data

Question	Example Comment	Category	Theme
Is there a need for more male elementary teachers? Why or why not?	Yes	Yes (More males needed)	More Males Needed
Is there a need for more male elementary teachers? Why or why not?	Yes, as a way to be a positive male in lives of children they may not have them; many students would benefit from having more male role models at young ages; Yes. The campuses I have taught on have been Title 1 campuses where the students do not have positive male role models on a regular basis	Role Models	Male Role Models
What, if any, are expected jobs for females within an elementary setting (classroom teachers, administrators, physical education teachers, custodians, office staff, etc)?	Classroom teacher, Admin, Coach, Custodian, Office staff; nurse, lunchroom workers, office workers: all jobs; Elementary teachers should be caring and meet all students' needs	Female Roles	Female Roles
What, if any, are expected jobs for males within an elementary setting (classroom teachers, administrators, physical education teachers, custodians, office staff, etc)?	Classroom teacher, Admin, Coach, Custodian, Office staff; PE teachers, coaches, custodians; Principals and PE coaches; Elementary teachers should be caring and meet all students' needs	Male Roles	Male Roles
What differences, if any, are there between female and male elementary teachers?	I've found that male teacher tend to have less difficulties with classroom management; Females tend to let kids get away with more disrespectful behavior; I have not known many male elementary teachers, but perhaps the men that choose to be elementary teachers are more passionate because society does not expect them to be elementary teachers, so they have had to fight more to become one; Their ideas on classroom management	Male and Female Teacher Differences	Male and Female Teacher Differences

Overall, most participants stated that there is a need for more male teachers in elementary schools. The responses to why there is a need for more male teachers in elementary schools were mainly associated with male role models. Example responses for the survey question, *Is there a need for more male elementary teachers*, can be seen in Table 5.

Another theme from the qualitative section of the survey was male and female roles in school. Most participants listed that males and females can fulfill all roles that are associated with elementary school. These roles included: classroom teachers, administrators, physical education teachers, custodians, and office staff. However, some participants commented that males can only fill the roles of physical education teachers, coaches, custodians, or administration. Also, a few participants stated that females could only fulfill the roles of nurse, lunchroom workers, office staff, and classroom teachers (see table 5 for more comments).

The last theme for the qualitative section of the survey related to differences, if any, between male and female teachers. The responses to this question varied between the perspectives of males having better classroom management skills, females having better skills classroom management skills, male teachers are more dedicated to their profession because it is against society's norms, and there is no difference between male and female teachers. However, most participants stated there is no difference between male and female teachers.

4.2 Analysis Of Quantitative Data

In the 22 item survey, comparing male and female responses, the Likert Scale survey questions were grouped into two categories, perceived teaching ability and level of student interactions between male and female teachers. An independent t-test was performed on the data with a 95% confidence interval for the mean difference. There was not a significant difference found in the total scores for perceived teaching ability of male teachers (M=33.7, SD=6.7) and the perceived teaching ability of female teachers (M=30.1, SD=4.8); $t(17) = -1.38, p = .186$. Furthermore, there was not a significant difference found in the total scores for perceived level of student interactions of male teachers (M=32.1, SD=8.1) and the perceived level of student interactions of female teachers (M=29.7, SD=4.4); $t(17) = -.877, p = .393$.

Although, a significant difference was not identified between the perceived teaching ability of male versus female teachers, there were questions in which responses seemed to vary. One example of a perspective that showed variance related to the following statement: *The male/female teachers I have worked with have an effective teaching style.*

Table 6. Effective Teaching Style

	Strongly Disagree/Disagree	Neither	Agree/Strongly Agree
The male teachers I have worked with have an effective teaching style.	5%	15%	80%
The female teachers I have worked with have an effective teaching style.	15%	5%	80%

Overall, five percent of respondents either “strongly disagreed” or “disagreed” with the effectiveness of a male teacher’s teaching style, while 15 percent of respondents either “strongly disagreed” or “disagreed” with a female teacher’s teaching style.

In regards to the level of student interactions among male and female teachers, survey responses continued to vary. Variance can be found in responses to the following statement: *The male/female teachers I have worked with are nurturing and sensitive to their students.*

Table 7. Nurturing and Sensitive to Students

	Strongly Disagree/Disagree	Neither	Agree/Strongly Agree
The male teachers I have worked with are nurturing and sensitive to their students.	15%	25%	55%
The female teachers I have worked with are nurturing and sensitive to their students.	10%	10%	80%

Overall, 55 percent of respondents either “agreed” or “strongly agreed” that male teachers are nurturing and sensitive to their students, while 80 percent of respondents either “strongly agreed” or “agreed” that female teachers are nurturing and sensitive to their students.

Another example from the survey where a difference in responses was noted pertained to the statement: *The male/female teachers I have worked with treat their students fairly.*

Table 8. Treat Students Fairly

	Strongly Disagree/Disagree	Neither	Agree/Strongly Agree
The male teachers I have worked with treat their students fairly.	10%	5%	85%
The female teachers I have worked with treat their students fairly.	10%	15%	75%

Overall, 85 percent of the respondents either “agreed” or “strongly agreed” that male teachers treat their students fairly, while 75 percent of respondents either “agreed” or “strongly agreed” that female teachers treat their students fairly.

5. Limitations

During this study the investigator encountered several factors that limited the study. First, the sample size of the study only consisted of 20 individuals. This size is considerably small and may not represent the whole population. Second, the participants in the study were located in the same geographical region and may only represent views of the teachers in that particular region. Third, the number of male participants in the study was not equivalent to the number of female participants. Finally, the investigator conducting the study is male. This may limit the study as well due to subconscious biases when analyzing the data. However, the investigator acknowledged his biases prior to analyzing the data in order to limit them in the study.

6. Discussion

In analysis of results, no statistically significant results were identified. However, qualitative analysis and results of specific survey questions provide insight into perceptions of gender that may still exist regarding males in the classroom. Insights include males as role models, roles of males and females inside schools, and the differences between male and female teachers’ classroom management style.

Almost all the participants perceived that more males are necessary in elementary schools to serve as role models for the students. The results of this study are similar to the findings from Woods¹¹, that the numbers of male teachers in the field of elementary education are few in comparison to female teachers. Furthermore, the National Center for Education Statistics⁸ states that 76% of teachers in the elementary education field are female.

The differing perceptions of male and female teachers in elementary schools demonstrate that while there may be a portion of the population that believes gender does not affect the management style of a classroom, there are others who perceive gender as influencing classroom management. These perceptions of gender can be related to stereotypical ideas of masculine and feminine behavior. Stereotypical views of masculine teachers involve strict, disciplinarian, leadership roles as described by one of the participants, “A male has a presence and tone about them that demands attention easier than a female.” Contrary to this, females are stereotypically depicted as weaker due to their femininity. This characteristic, however, may be perceived to be better for early childhood education. In the end, there was no overwhelming evidence that supported a difference in the perception of male and female teachers.

The perceived roles of males and females in schools may be due to underlying gender stereotypes in society. Data collected from the study suggests that females are perceived to be best suited to fill the roles of classroom teacher, lunchroom worker, and office staff, based on their gender. The data further suggests males are still perceived to fill the roles of coaches, physical education teachers, administrators, and custodians. To diminish gender stereotypes that may still exist, educators need to better understand how gender influences their perceptions of the roles males and females can fill in society. For example, educators can share images and real life examples of women in prominent positions in society. Conversely, males can be portrayed in caregiving roles such as a nurse, teacher, or social worker.

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