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Getting Guys Hooked on Teaching Young Children

William Marsiglio — July 21, 2009

This commentary addresses the following questions: Why do so few men teach in the earlier grades? What can be done to entice men to teach younger students? Why we should we bother?

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics for 2008, males represent only 2.4 and 18.8 percent of teachers in preschool/kindergarten and elementary/middle school, respectively. Forty-four percent of secondary school teachers are male. Why do so few men teach in the earlier grades? What can be done to entice men to teach younger students? Why should we bother? Since the early 1990s, these and related questions have received increasing attention in both the popular press and academic circles.

Various studies show that most men avoid teaching careers because of one or more of the following reasons: low social status, low salary, perception of teaching as “women’s work,” concerns about potential claims of child abuse, and the absence of a male peer group. Men accentuate these reasons when they consider teaching younger children.

Obviously, if we want to increase men’s involvement in schools, we should pay attention to these findings and develop responsive recruitment strategies. But we need to also widen our vision of men who “teach.” One approach is to frame classroom teaching as part of the larger matrix of male youth workers in the community that includes youth ministers, recreational coaches, Boys & Girls Club staff, Big Brothers, 4-H Club leaders, Boy Scouts leaders, juvenile probation officers, and the like.

In my interviews with a diverse sample of 55 paid and volunteer male youth workers (including teachers) for my recent book, *Men on a Mission: Valuing Youth Work in Our Communities*, I was struck by how committed the men ranging in age from 19 to 65 were to teaching children life lessons as well as skills. All but one had worked with kids in different types of settings during their lifetime. Most integrated their experientially based knowledge from one position into how they responded to youth in others. Thomas, an African American first grade teacher, asserts that the training he received in therapeutic crisis intervention while working with trouble children on a psychiatric ward helps him communicate more effectively with his first-graders.

As a society we need to “grow” more men like Thomas. If we do a better job nurturing a generative spirit among boys and young men, more guys will want to pursue a career in teaching. A generative person seeks to pass on valued traditions, teach key skills and viewpoints, communicate wisdom, and help younger generations reach their full

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potential. Most of the men I interviewed expressed this spirit. The 21 men who had formal experience teaching youth in schools, along with the other men, generated insights about developing rapport, building trust, managing emotions, and being “real” within a culture permeated by “stranger danger” that translates into suspicion and fear of adult men.

For generative men, we need to create pathways that enable them to invest their full or even part-time energies into working with youth in school settings. Reggie, an affable fourth grade teacher, found his way into teaching in an unconventional manner at the age of 40. Several men noticed Reggie’s knack for relating to kids informally at a country club where he worked for many years after leaving the military. With the men’s unique emotional and financial support, Reggie went to college to pursue his dream of helping disadvantaged African American kids make it through the system. Now, in addition to being a hardworking elementary school teacher, he regularly implores older kids to think about the virtues of a teaching career.

To be real—if more men are to enter early education as teachers, we must transform the larger social structures and processes that have discouraged men from being full partners with women in building a generative society. In broad terms, more needs to be done to reward men for being nurturing toward their own and unrelated children, just like fathers are applauded for being reliable breadwinners. A first step is to train boys to be more active, conscientious youth workers. Parents, in concert with youth workers, can encourage boys to assume responsibilities for younger children through babysitting, school/community-based mentoring, coaching, and leadership roles in recreation groups like the Boys Scouts, 4H-Club, and Boys & Girls clubs. Likewise, civic and business organizations can support exiting youth programs or develop new ones to entice men to be more involved with youth. The success of these efforts may hinge, in part, on whether men learn to be more self-reflective about what they can offer kids and how they can benefit personally from doing youth work. In addition, redefining good fathering to incorporate men’s active involvement with unrelated youth in the community can reinforce a collective form of fathering with peer accountability. Adopting this philosophy can improve the chances that men who pursue careers in early education will garner more respect from other men (and women) than they do now. For many poor inner-city areas, structural changes are needed to attract more career-oriented men to live and work there. A migration stream back to these urban areas will expand the pool of men who might consider teaching young students. Finally, the public must balance more reasonably its vigilance to protect kids from the “bad guys”—the pedophiles, child abusers, and child pornographers—while celebrating the “good guys.” Unfortunately, bad guys, despite their relatively small number, receive a disproportionate amount of media attention.

But can men add anything women don’t already provide in the classroom? Although most agree that the low percentages of male teachers in the earlier grades is unfortunate,

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much debate focuses on whether and how teachers' gender makes a difference for students, especially in terms of their scholastic performance. The limited research results are somewhat mixed. For example, some studies, such as John Kreig's research with fourth graders from the state of Washington and Andrew Martin and Herb Marsh's study of Australian junior and middle high school students, indicate that having men teach them does not affect boys' motivation, engagement, or performance on standardized tests, although boys may prefer to consult with men teachers on personal matters. Meanwhile, Thomas Dee, an economist, provides evidence to the contrary based on his analysis of the 1988 National Education Longitudinal Survey of eighth graders. This survey covered public and private schools and included data from two of each student's teachers from different subjects. Dee concludes that, "girls have better educational outcomes when taught by women and boys are better off when taught by men."

Looking beyond the debate about the relationship between teachers' gender and students' scholastic outcomes, teachers can provide all sorts of valuable life lessons that extend beyond basic knowledge. Reggie, for instance, devotes time during his "morning meetings" to discuss how "certain aspects of the hip-hop culture" can be "demeaning" to women. He challenges boys and girls alike to look seriously at key social topics that shape gender relations. Regrettably, despite changing gender norms, on certain issues young boys are more apt to "hear" a male teacher than one who's female. So too, hearing a man talk forcefully about how guys need to respect females may help young girls build confidence and make smart decisions about their emerging identities.

Although much is made about men teachers serving as "role models," the phrase is often used without defining the attributes and behaviors being modeled. Are men important because of their sheer physical presence, which helps to make the school culture more "boy friendly?" Do they provide a reference point for responsible behavior? Are they a valuable replacement figure for the kids without attentive fathers? Do they make a difference by displaying counter-stereotypical "male" beliefs and behaviors?

Having a more gender balanced ratio of teachers should send a powerful message to young kids that learning in a school setting is neither feminine nor masculine—it is a human experience. Male teachers can demonstrate to both boys and girls that men are capable of providing a supportive learning environment. They can model how to conduct productive, cooperative, and respectful working relations with both female and male colleagues. I also suspect that when young boys are exposed to men as teachers in sufficient quantities, some boys will find it easier to set aside their masculine posturing that denigrates school success.

Of course, narrowing the gap in the gender ratio by recruiting more men into the classroom irrespective of their qualifications, teaching styles, and motives is not the point. Hiring male teachers who do a poor job in the classroom will do more harm than good. Moreover, calling for more men to invest their time and energies into teaching at

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the younger grades should not be interpreted as an indictment on women's overall teaching abilities, or their contribution to boys' learning more specifically.

Ideally, youth should be encouraged to see occupations as open to individuals regardless of gender stereotypes. However, today, for men, developing a passion to teach young kids is still too often stigmatized and antithetical to conventional definitions of manhood. Ultimately, though, if cultural forces elevate the status of men's youth work in general, more men may develop and express a passion for teaching youth.

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