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FEW GOOD MEN:

Class, research look at lack of male early childhood teachers

New summer class offered



Early in his teaching career, Shaun Johnson felt odd about his career path. Already facing the challenges of any teacher in the Washington, D.C. public school system, he said that during his year teaching, he constantly confronted his inner feelings. “Who am I to have chosen it?” Johnson asked himself. “What’s different about me?”

Outwardly, for Johnson’s work environment, plenty appeared different. As a second-year curriculum and instruction doctoral student, he sported a beard (which he has since shaved). Such maleness is what was different about him when he taught in his elementary school. He found what men who enter early childhood instruction discover: they are virtually isolated.

Nationally, the latest reports show historic lows in the numbers of men teaching. A study by the National Education Association cites the lowest numbers in 40 years. Only 9 per-

cent of elementary school teachers are men. Less than 25 percent of all public school teachers are male. However, Indiana has among the highest numbers of male teachers in the nation. Nearly 31 percent of the state’s public school teachers are men.

Johnson said he had a hard time getting people to take him seriously as a working professional in his teaching role. “I

sort of got frustrated after a while with people telling me how ‘cute’ it is that I taught,” he said. “You know, ‘Isn’t that adorable?’”

The experience drove Johnson to study the problem. He developed a class for a summer semester in the IU School of Education called “Men in Education and the Male Teacher.” He designed the course to address reasons behind the growing gap between numbers of male and female teachers in public schools. By the end of the course, students were to design actions to address recruiting and retention problems.

Heading into the course, Johnson had already concluded it’s not just about the school workplace. “The issue may be less about education per se,” Johnson said, “and more about society and how men are fit into these categories and women are fit into these categories.”

Another Education School doctoral student, Volkan Sahin, and his colleague came to similar findings in “Communicating with Men: Professional Motivation of Male Early Childhood Teachers.” Sahin, a student who came from Turkey to IU in 1999, worked with Arif Yilmaz, who has now returned to his native Turkey. Sahin said a literature review revealed a basic problem. “There are a lot of negative factors, basically preventing men from entering this field,” Sahin said. “Not only that, even if they somehow enter the area, there are a lot of things that just make them go away quickly.”

As Johnson suggested, stereotypical male roles come into

“A lot of these male teachers strongly believe they can reach the children who are maybe hard to manage.” — Shaun Johnson



Shaun Johnson

play. Sahin's study found that male teachers working with young students often felt an expectation to be the tough disciplinarian, fix broken items in the classroom, and lift anything heavy. "This actually bothers them, just being seen as a handyman in the classroom," Sahin said. "Not like a professional, not like a colleague, but like a handyman and a disciplinarian."

Sahin's study surveyed male teachers about why they entered the field and why they stay in teaching. Using a small sampling, he found that four factors made them choose the profession and stay with it. The study determined that previous experience with children makes a difference. Along



Volkan Sahin

Hillary Demmon, IU Media Relations

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those same lines, men who teach also tend to be parents.

Also, men who teach often want to because they feel a responsibility as a role model, according to Sahin's research. Johnson said the growing numbers of children without fathers might be a driving force. "A lot of these male teachers strongly believe they can reach the children who are maybe hard to manage," he said.

Finally, Sahin and Yilmaz found a positive workplace environment is key to supporting the male teacher in early childhood education. Johnson found the work environment critically important. He recalled feeling "completely out of the ordinary" as one of three male teachers among 45 female teachers in his school. Break-room discussions often centered around baby showers and birthing issues. Further, he said other literature indicates male teachers suffer "identity bruises," such as comments from female teachers suggesting the men can't marry because they couldn't support a wife on the small salary of a teacher.

Both Sahin and Johnson say it makes intuitive sense that the lack of male elementary teachers is a problem. But both also say no research indicates that the low numbers of men in the profession is definitely harming children's educational experiences.

"None of the literature is pointing out that gender has anything to do with student achievement," Johnson said. "Effective teaching and high-quality teachers and their message are more important than their gender. So male, female teacher, it makes no difference. That's kind of disappointing, because you can say, 'What's the point, then,'" Johnson said.

"For practical reasons, there is no difference (between men and women teaching and results)," Sahin said. "There is nothing the men can do the woman cannot," he added.

Still, Sahin said it is an important issue, and children need the male perspective. He said children are aware of gender roles at an early age. Johnson suggested that fewer men in teaching roles may reinforce existing stereotypes about what roles men and women play. He added that having men as teachers may be particularly important because so many children don't have a father living in the home. "A lot of these male teachers strongly believe they can reach the children who are maybe hard to manage," Johnson said.

Johnson said he hopes his class will produce teachers who will at least consider the issue. "They'll hopefully be more critical of how they promote gender practices in their classrooms," he said, "but then consider mentoring or encouraging men to become education majors or work with younger children."



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