

Bearded, Beardless and Fearless Leaders

It was a moment of great anticipation and excitement as I sat among a group of young male early childhood pre-service students gathering to adopt the by-laws to their newfound student organization. The leader of the group, a senior named Jake, began with introductions by asking each member to share one interesting fact about them. From my perspective of a female faculty member, I found this icebreaker very similar to the way groups of women often start their meetings. The first to respond was Mike, a burly man with a thick black beard. Most often, when Mike goes into the infant-toddler lab, the children surround him and cuddle him as if he were a huge teddy bear! Mike's response was simple, "I am a junior and have no problem growing facial hair". Amidst the laughs and next responses I quickly saw a pattern emerge that does not occur in my meetings that are predominately women. As each young man introduced himself he responded to the same fact; either he could or could not grow facial hair. As recorded in the minutes of the first official Men in Education (M.E.N.) student organization, eight out of twelve men reported that they had no problem with that task.

As program director of the early childhood program in which nearly all students are female, I also served as the mentor to a handful of these young men who had a vision and started an organization for all early childhood men on this university campus. With watchful eye, I now observed how this group of twelve young men, future leaders in education, adopted their newly written by-laws and set goals for the semester. There was much that I would learn from observing this group of bearded, beardless, and fearless leaders in early childhood education as they engaged in their own group process.

Being the only woman among the twelve men, I felt like the 'outsider' of the group. It occurred to me that perhaps I was experiencing the same type of emotions that these young men may feel when they find they are the only male among a group of females in their ECE classes. For example, the icebreaker revealed to me that an outsider - such as being the only man in a group of women, or in my case, the only woman in a group of men - has little power and feeling of belonging. I realized my role was to sit back and observe the process these men used to conduct their business. This caused me to reflect on the role of a woman advisor to a group of men students and offering some initial recommendations:

- Let go of any assumption that the way women run things is the right way
- Listen to the conversations to glean what is important to men
- Suppress the need to give your opinion or approval
- Keep focused on the goal - to have the men succeed on their own terms

As these young men set their own agenda they took ownership of their group and planned several service learning projects that were relevant to them over the course

of the semester. These projects included:

- A mentor/mentee project in which each male student was paired with an ECE professional in the field to offer them support and answer any questions they may have about the profession
- A plan to create t-shirts that would provide visibility of their group on campus
- An activity with the Boys and Girls club to plan a scavenger hunt for the elementary children in the after school club
- A presentation about the M.E.N. group at a state-wide Student Development Conference

These activities reflected the interests of the men – access to professional support, visibility to others on campus, active learning with children, and the development of their own skills as leaders.

As the semester progresses, the group holds monthly meetings to work on their projects. Additionally, each week a team of two-three men meet on Friday afternoon with me as the advisor of the M.E.N. group to review accomplishments and next steps.

Recruitment and retention of male students will continue to be a challenge for educational programs in which males are a minority such as, early childhood, family and consumer science, and nursing. Many of these young men may feel like outsiders in a field where faculty and other students are predominately female. Still it is important for young children to experience and relate to teachers who are male and female.

Educational leaders are being encouraged to continue their efforts to recruit and retain men into early childhood education and other fields. Doing this work is a challenge but also an adventure. For female faculty this may mean taking on a different perspective about their role as advisor and having male students take the lead. Supporting young men to form their own organizations and set their own agenda is one approach. However, with this kind of encouragement, male students can become the Bearded, Beardless and Fearless Leaders needed in Early Childhood.