

Male Teachers in Elementary Settings: Perceptions of a Teaching Career

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Abstract: This study explored the perceptions of teachers who identify as male/male of color teachers about their sense of competence and satisfaction with their choice of career working with young children in elementary settings. This study sought to answer questions about the perceived factors affecting their development as teachers of young children and the potential for improving the recruitment and retention of male teachers in the primary grades. Male and male of color elementary school teachers were invited to share their perceptions of their experiences related to becoming and being a teacher in the primary grades through a questionnaire and interviews. The study found participants felt that their experience as teachers was informed by uniquely gendered factors, such as their male and/or intersectional identities and the associated perspectives and experiences as well as by more global factors such as their commitment to their professional expertise as effective teachers. Overall, the study suggests that both gendered and global factors have implications for recruitment and retention given that they contribute to male and male of color teachers' sense of competence and satisfaction teaching young children in elementary settings.

Keywords: Elementary education, Male teachers of color, Teacher diversity, Recruitment & retention

Introduction

Elementary school teachers who identify as male comprise a small fraction of the overall population of PreK-5 teachers and this study sought to understand their experience. The ubiquitous association of the female gender with a career as an elementary school teacher is reflected in the overwhelming large percentage of elementary teachers in the U.S. identify as female and White. It is in this context, in which it is assumed that the teacher is a White female, that males/males of color undertake a career teaching young child. By exploring the perceptions of the men/men of color who have chosen this occupation despite the societal assumptions, this paper highlights perceived factors for how they develop a sense of job satisfaction as teachers in primary grades. While the percentage of men who teach in primary settings is low, much can be learned by listening to the men/men of color currently in the profession. Due to the dearth of research in this area, this study sought out male/male of color elementary school teachers willing to share their thoughts and experiences. Listening to the males/males of color who currently teach young children can increase knowledge and understanding of what they believe has influenced them both to become a teacher and to stay in the profession.

Greater participation by males/men of color in teaching PreK-5 merits particular attention given the current teacher shortages as well as the needs for workforce diversification. If men/men of color were step into these jobs, it could address issues of teacher shortages and workforce diversification to better serve the student population. To pursue teaching as a career and step into the teaching profession, men/men of color must deal with these societal and cultural barriers in order to feel comfortable seeing themselves in the role. Highlighting the value of male/male of color experiential knowledge base could support men/men of color to see themselves in the role as an educator. In addition, male/male of color teacher role models could inspire men/men of color to see themselves as teachers. At the same time, seeing themselves becoming a role model could motivate men/men of color to become a teacher. In addition to recruitment, the retention of male/male of color teachers is also important. An effective process of professional development can contribute significantly to male/male of color teachers' overall sense of job satisfaction and a desire to stay in the profession. As male/male of color teachers engage in their work, it is important that they find the support, camaraderie and recognition needed to move forward through the stages of development. Another frequently overlooked aspect of professional development is the development of a teacher identity. This may have particular relevance for males and males of color who must forge their teacher identity in contrast to societal conceptions of teachers as female and White. To be successful, novice teachers must start by understanding themselves and understanding what they bring with them into teaching. Then, teachers use a sense of agency to take control of their own development.

Method

This mixed-methods study was conducted at a teacher credentialing program of a public university. Data for this study were collected over two years. Information about the male/male of color elementary school teachers' attitudes were obtained in two parts: a questionnaire using a Likert scale for quantitative data and small, focus group interviews for qualitative data.

Participants

Participants were males who graduated from one teacher credential program with a multiple subject teaching credential, authorizing them to teach elementary age students. 30 responded to the questionnaire. 2 identified as Asian/Pacific Islander, 12 identified as Hispanic/Latino and 16 identified as White.

Table 1. Questionnaire Participant Demographics

Variable	N	%
Asian/Pacific Islander	2	6.6
Hispanic/Latino	12	40
White	16	53.3
Taught >4 yrs	15	50
Taught 4 or less yrs	15	50
Total	30	

Half of the participants had taught more than four years and half had taught 4 or less years (see Table 1). The 30 participants who responded to the questionnaire were invited to participate in the focus group interviews. 8 of these participants were interviewed. 3 identified as Hispanic/Latino and 5 identified as White. 6 had taught for more than 4 years and 2 had taught for 4 years or less.

Data Collection

All 30 participants completed the questionnaire, consisting of 10 items which focused on the participants' perceptions and experiences related being an elementary school teacher. The questionnaire used a 5-point scale which participants used to rate their level of agreement for each item with one of the response alternatives ranging from one to five: 1=strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3=neutral, 4=agree, and 5=strongly agree. Responses to the questionnaire were analyzed for central tendency and range (see Table 3). Based on the results of the questionnaire, 5 open-ended interview questions were designed to obtain qualitative data that illustrated and further elaborated the quantitative findings. The open-ended responses to the interview questions were reviewed and coded (see Table 4). The coded concepts within the responses were then used to describe 3 main themes.

Results

Questionnaire

Add results and findings here. The questionnaire consisted of 10 items, which focused on the participants' perceptions and experiences related being an elementary school teacher. The 30 respondents (N=30) rated their sense of career satisfaction and career choice, their teacher qualities, their role perceptions, their working relationships and their developing professional expertise. An analysis of this ordinal data was focused on finding the central tendency, determined by finding the median for each item. The range of the responses was determined by finding the Inter-Quartile Range (IQR) of each item. The following table shows the median (Mdn) and the range (IQR) for each item (see Table 2).

Overall, the findings indicated a general consensus among male/male of color teachers' attitudes with regard to their careers as elementary school teachers. In a statement related to career satisfaction, respondents almost unanimously strongly agreed (96.7%) that teaching elementary school is a fulfilling career for men/men of color. In statements related to career choice, respondents considered two statements. When asked if their decision to become elementary school teachers was influenced by the male elementary school teachers they have known, 86.7 % of respondents disagreed or were unsure. On the other hand, 93.3% of respondents indicated that they believed it important that men considering a career in teaching have the opportunity to talk with men who already teach. In response to three statements related to the teacher qualities of males/males of color as elementary school teachers, respondents were in overwhelming agreement.

Table 2. Questionnaire Response Data

Item	Mdn	IQR
Teaching young children at the elementary school level is a fulfilling career for men/men of color.	5	1
My own positive & negative school experiences as a male student/male student of color influence my thinking and actions for being an effective elementary teacher.	5	1
My decision to become an elementary school teacher was influenced by the male elementary school teachers I have known.	2	1
It would be beneficial for men/men of color considering this career to have opportunities to talk with men/men of color who are already teaching elementary school.	4.5	1
Male elementary school teachers have different perspectives & life experiences than female teachers that are valuable for working with elementary age children.	4.5	1
Men/men of color possess the qualities needed to work with young children	5	1
I can design & implement effective learning activities for young children, both male & female, to support my students' learning & development.	5	0
It is important for men/men of color to have opportunities to grow & develop their professional skills and knowledge for teaching elementary school.	5	0
Male elementary school teachers have unique role expectations placed on them (different from female teachers) for what they are expected to do as teachers.	5	1
Male elementary school teachers benefit from having working relationships with other male elementary school teachers.	5	1

First, 93.3% of respondents strongly agreed or agreed when asked if their own schooling experiences as male students influenced their thinking and actions for effective teaching. Second, 86.7% of respondents strongly agreed or agreed that male/male of color teachers have distinct perspectives & life experiences than female teachers that are valuable for working with elementary age children. Third, 86.7% strongly agreed or agreed that men possess the qualities needed to work with young children, such as being nurturing, patient & empathetic. Also, in statements related to developing professional expertise, respondents unanimously agreed (100%) that male/male of color elementary school teachers can design & implement effective learning activities for young children, both male & female, to support student learning & development. In addition, they were in unanimous agreement that they valued opportunities to grow & develop their professional skills and knowledge for teaching elementary school. In response to statements about role perceptions, responses were consistent. 86.7% of respondents strongly agreed or agreed that male teachers have unique role expectations placed upon them (different from female teachers) for what they are expected to do as teachers. Finally, in statements related to working relationships, the vast majority of respondents (93.3%) were in agreement that communication and working relationships with other male/male of color teachers were beneficial to them.

Interview

The interviews consisted of 5 open-ended questions related to the topics of career satisfaction, their lived experience in relation to their teacher qualities, their developing professional expertise, their role perceptions and expectations and their working relationships. They were designed to obtain qualitative data, in particular, examples from participants own experiences to illustrate and further elaborate the quantitative findings from the questionnaire. Responses to the 5 open-ended questions were analyzed resulting in a total of 7 codes for all responses (see Table 4). Then, these were utilized to describe overarching themes.

Table 4: Interview Analysis Results

Question	Codes Assigned
1. Career satisfaction	Relationships, Role model, Identity match, Nature of the profession
2. Lived experience & teacher qualities	Relationships, Role model, Identity match, Nature of the profession
3. Developing expertise	Relationships, Role model, Identity match, Nature of the profession
4. Role perceptions & expectations	Relationships, Gendered perceptions/expectations, Identity match vrs mismatch
5. Working relationships	Relationships, Gendered Communication

The first three questions of the interview explored the male/male of color teachers’ attitudes related to their career satisfaction, the value of their lived experience, both personal and professional, to their work as elementary school teachers, and their developing professional expertise. Questions One, Two and Three had 4 codes: (1) relationships, (2) role model, (3) identity match, and (7) nature of the profession. When answering the first question about their high sense of career satisfaction, the top reasons given included their relationships with students and their position as a role model. When answering the second question about the value of their life experience as males/males of color for their teacher qualities, they shared that their gendered lived experience served as an asset enabling them to be an effective male role model and build relationships with their students. When answering the third question about their developing expertise, all participants expressed deep satisfaction with the nature of the profession, which allowed them to do work they enjoyed and to continue developing their professional expertise in rewarding ways. The remaining two questions of the interview explored the male/male of color teachers’ attitudes related to their working relationships and the perceptions and expectations they experienced in the school context. Questions Four and Five had 4 codes: (1) relationships, (2) gendered perceptions /expectations, (3) identity match vrs mismatch, and (4) gendered communications. When answering the next question about the unique experiences that men/men of color had in a field dominated by White women, participants explained that they learned that the perceptions and expectations they frequently faced in the school setting resulted from the fact that they identified as male/male of color. When asked the final question about their working relationships, most participants stated that while their professional relationships regardless

of gender were productive and rewarding, they experienced an extra benefit of communicating with other male/male of color teachers.

Themes

Overall, 3 themes captured the coded concepts expressed by the male/male of color teachers related to perceptions of themselves as teachers of young children and their sense of career satisfaction: 1) centering work on relationships with students 2) mitigating gendered perceptions and expectations 3) making the most of the profession's possibilities. Theme One described participants' perceptions that relationships with their students was what gave their work as teachers in elementary settings meaning and purpose. They became a male/male of color role model for their students. Theme Two described participants' perceptions that mitigating gendered perceptions and expectations was a necessary in order to have a satisfying career. Most importantly they had to learn to hold onto what they brought with them from their own life experiences and male/male of color identity to inform their teacher role in a way that reflected their own values. Theme Three described participants' perceptions that making the most of the profession's possibilities was a main reason that teaching was an enjoyable and satisfying job.

Discussion

For males/males of color to consider teaching elementary school, they need to be able to see themselves in that role. The overwhelmingly female and White demographics of elementary school teachers can present challenges for men/men of color to see themselves as teachers of young children. Nevertheless, the teachers in this study showed that they could. Listening to the males/males of color who currently teach young children highlighted that men/men of color perceive themselves as capable and effective teachers and that their sense of competence and career satisfaction results from both gendered and global understandings of their role as teachers. The teachers in this study acted with a sense of agency to take control of their own development as teachers. Their great sense of satisfaction with their career choice was the result in large part of their willingness to define their role on their own terms and to deal with gendered perceptions successfully. They took ownership of all that they brought with them into teaching, including their conceptions of themselves as men/men of color as well as their beliefs about what makes a good teacher. These gendered intersectional identities and associated perspectives and experiences became a richly textured resource for them informing their role as a teacher of children in the primary grades. They prioritized their relationships with their students as the central aspect of their work as teachers. In so doing, they became male role models dedicated to fostering the development of the young children in their care. In addition, they recognized the global aspects of teaching such as the generative possibilities the nature of this profession offered that they found particularly interesting and enjoyable. This expanded their commitment to develop their professional expertise and engage more deeply in the work of teaching young children. Their satisfaction was also the result of learning to deal with gendered perceptions and expectations that they faced due to being male/male of color in a setting demographically dominated by White females. They took opportunities to have conversations with other teachers, particularly male teachers, to talk

about the gendered perceptions and expectations, learning to respond in ways that helped them to clarify who they wanted to be as male/male of color teachers in elementary settings. They concluded that learning to navigate these perceptions in the ways that were most productive was part of their development as teachers.

Conclusion & Recommendations

The participants of this study showed that men/men of color teachers can feel a sense of competence and satisfaction working with young children. To do so, they can tap their gendered experiences as males/males of color and incorporate them into their teaching roles. Embracing their uniquely gendered characteristics within their conception of themselves as teachers can deepen their understanding and effectiveness as teachers. At the same time, they can tap their global experiences as members of this engaging profession, developing their professional expertise and collegial collaborations. Embracing work that is characterized by variety, fun, creativity and determination to move ideas from concept to completion, they can see their own potential to make a difference for their students, schools and communities. Given the problems related to the teacher shortages and lack of diversity of the teacher workforce in the US, males/males of color could step into careers teaching in early childhood education and the primary grades. This study suggests that more males/males of color can overcome societal and cultural barriers in order to redefine work teaching young children as a career that they could see themselves doing and doing well. This study has added to the knowledge about what leads to the success of male/male of color elementary school teachers. While small, this study provided information on perceived factors that have made the profession possible for some men. In order to be successful, recruitment and retention of male/male of color teachers could do more to be sensitive to the uniquely gendered factors as well as the more global factors that men/men of color perceive inform their experience as teachers of young children. It is recommended that recruitment and retention programs for primary grade teachers lift up the voices of male/male of color teachers working with young children. These teachers have valuable experiences to share of their work in this profession, the joys and the challenges, which show that this is a viable role for men/men of color in US society. It is further recommended that professional development programs across the stages of teacher development support male/male of color teachers in ways that are sensitive to and supportive of their gendered intersectional identities.