The Unicorn Teacher: Males in Early Elementary and Middle Level Education

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Abstract

This paper examines how male preservice teachers pursuing an elementary or middle level education certification perceive barriers and supports in their chosen major and future profession. To answer this question, the authors used a convenience sample of male undergraduate students at a mid-sized, private, liberal arts college. Sixteen male students completed an online 24-question Likert scale survey and nine of these students participated in a semi-structured focus group. Our results support current literature findings showing male preservice teachers experience barriers to the field related to gender identity. Additionally, findings highlight the significant role teacher preparation programs, cooperating teachers, and peer support systems play in the resiliency and success of male preservice teachers. Implications from this research include the need for teacher preparation programs to address these barriers and provide systems of support of this underserved population.

Keywords: teacher preparation, male teachers, perceptions of male teachers

The unicorn is a mythical creature often used to symbolize something rare and magical - like a male teacher in grades K-8. Teaching has historically been viewed as an acceptable career for women and as such the field of education as a whole is female-dominated (Rich, 2014). In grades K-12, 75% of teachers are female; almost 90% of teachers in grades K-6 are female (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021; Rich, 2014). In the United States, just 3.2% of preschool and kindergarten teachers are male (Council for Professional Recognition, 2023). This disparity can be seen across the globe - the United States, Turkey, the United Kingdom, and Australia all report low percentages of men in the classroom at all levels (Anliak & Beyazkurk, 2008; Malaby & Ramsey, 2010). Over time, becoming a high school or college teacher has generally been viewed favorably for male teachers, but pursuing a degree in early elementary

education (EE) or middle level education (MLE) has remained an acceptable career choice only for female students (Malaby & Ramsey, 2010).

Males pursuing elementary teaching positions are often viewed in a negative light by peers and society. They are more likely to be questioned about their choice of career and to have others assume they are not as smart as those who teach high school or are simply looking for an easy career path (Council for Professional Recognition, 2023; Pollitt & Oldfield, 2017). School districts are actively seeking male elementary and middle level teachers to serve as role models for male students (Pollitt & Oldfield, 2017) and to provide a more representative teaching faculty for their students. Yet, societal expectations and gender stereotypes often serve as a barrier to those males who are seeking to enter the field of education, making it difficult to recruit and retain male students in teacher education programs.

Therefore, understanding both the barriers for males entering the teaching profession and the support structures that enable males to persist in the field is critical to increasing the number of male EE and MLE teachers. The following research questions guided this paper:

1. What types of barriers and supports do male preservice teachers in EE or MLE programs encounter in their teacher education program?
2. From where or who do male preservice teachers in EE or MLE programs perceive barriers to persist in the major or entry into the profession?
3. From where or who do male preservice teachers in EE or MLE programs perceive support to persist in the major or entry into the profession?

Literature Review

Understanding the barriers and support structures that male undergraduate preservice teachers experience in teacher preparation programs (TPP) may be considered a black-hole

research topic due to the limited peer reviewed research available within the field. Much of the literature available was published prior to or during the early 2000's. With many of these studies, the generalizability of the findings is limited due to the qualitative nature of the study and/or the international location of the study. A common thread across the literature is a call for further exploration of the factors that contribute to the failure or success of male preservice teachers during their TPP. The following sections share findings from the literature review related to the barriers to the field and the support structures available for these students.

Barriers to the Field

Research states that the three main barriers for male students pursuing EE or MLE certification are the following factors 1) societal views; 2) perceived lack of intellectual challenge; 3) a lack of belonging (Cruickshank et al., 2021; Sargent, 2000; Tucker, 2015). Each of these three barriers will be explained in the paragraphs that follow.

Being a teacher in EE and MLE is seen as "women's work" and is not always viewed by society as a respectable career path for men due to its reputation (Council for Professional Recognition, 2023; Malaby & Ramsey, 2010). Elementary teachers are viewed as a "surrogate mother" (p. 353) and society at large often believes men do not have a "natural capacity for caring" (p. 352) for young people (Lovett, 2014). At the same time, males who do show nurturing characteristics are viewed suspiciously and feared to be sexual predators of children (Cruickshank et al., 2021; Lovett, 2014; Tucker, 2015; Weaver-Hightower, 2011). This viewpoint can be especially prevalent in smaller towns where it is not as common for people to veer from traditional gender roles (Anliak & Beyazkurk, 2008). Male teachers tend to worry about this and avoid contact with children in any capacity, which becomes a Catch-22. They take efforts to avoid any slight signs of impropriety, which potentially leads to colleagues questioning

male teachers' ability to be caring and nurturing (Cruickshank et al., 2021; Lovett, 2014; Malaby & Ramsey, 2010).

Since teaching is seen as women's work, it is often regarded as a low-status profession. As such, wages are low compared to jobs requiring similar educational backgrounds and pay has remained stagnant in the face of inflation (Lovett, 2014; Malaby & Ramsey, 2010; Rich, 2014). Additionally, there are those who view education coursework at the university level as easy and believe men are "too smart" for teaching - that they ought to use their talents in another profession to make more money (Weaver-Hightower, 2011). As a result, there is often an assumption that those who select this career choice are doing so because it is the path of least resistance. Male students may experience ridicule from peers and/or family members as a result of their choice of major and desire to pursue a career in teaching (Anliak & Beyazkurk, 2008; Weaver-Hightower, 2011). This assumption of incompetence has been also observed in teacher preparation programs (TPP), where there may be lower expectations from faculty and cooperating teachers (CT) who assume the male student is not as capable (Pollitt & Oldfield, 2017; Sargent, 2000). Perceptions of ability have also been noted as a reason for exiting the teaching profession (Sullivan, et al, 2022).

When negative societal viewpoints are coupled with challenges surrounding identity development as a male teacher, some EE and MLE teachers report a lack of belonging to the profession (Anliak & Beyazkurk, 2008; Malaby & Ramsey, 2010). Male EE and MLE preservice teachers often have to contend with negative stereotypes and questions about their masculinity (Lovett, 2014). For example, being able to execute and design craft-based activities or cute decorations is often seen as a female quality. For this reason, male teachers in elementary schools are often stereotyped as gay men (Lovett, 2014; Malaby & Ramsey, 2010). Foster and

Newman (2005) refer to the social stigmas related to education as a career choice as "identity bruising." Such outside reactions cause male preservice teachers to have "exit strategies and alternative careers even before their first teaching jobs" (Weaver-Hightower, 2011, p. 107).

Furthermore, as a rarified group, male teachers in EE and MLE are expected to fill certain roles that would be expected of the "ideal" male teacher (like disciplinarian). Some males may not want to be seen solely as a disciplinarian or pursue a position of authority (e.g., a principal). Inaction in filling such a role could cause discord among colleagues (Malaby & Ramsey, 2010; Weaver-Hightower, 2011), which would lead to a sense of isolation. It could also cause undue stress among male educators and/or preservice teachers, making it difficult to retain them in the educational field. Being one of a handful can lead to feelings of isolation or result in biased treatment (Malaby & Ramsey, 2010). These potentially socially awkward situations may lead to anxiety or a sense of otherness for the male teachers (Anliak & Beyazkurk, 2008; Cruickshank et al., 2021; Mistry & Sood, 2013); which may lead to male teachers feeling unwelcome in the field of education.

The trend of questioning male EE or MLE teachers' capabilities and motives simply due to their gender continues to be a barrier to male teacher recruitment and retention, even as school districts actively seek to increase the number of male educators in the classroom (Pollitt & Oldfield, 2017). All three barriers – societal views, perceived lack of intellectual challenge, and a lack of belonging – work in tandem to contribute to struggles of male EE and MLE teachers.

Support Structures

Although there are reasons for males to stop pursuing a career in education, there are reasons they persist. The support structures present as the alternate side of the coin to the barriers described above. Although there are negative societal viewpoints about male EE and MLE

teachers, there is privilege and attention that comes with being part of this group. They often edge out their female counterparts for jobs and enjoy greater job security (Rich, 2014; Weaver-Hightower, 2011). This "glass escalator" often removes male teachers from the classroom into administrative jobs (Shpancer et al., 2019). This results in a greater percentage of males in administrator and principal positions although classroom teachers are predominantly female (Rich, 2014).

Even though males may feel isolated or be viewed as predators, there are so few of them that they are typically more desired for employment because of this rarity. Male elementary teachers believe they can provide a different view of masculinity, which is beneficial for young students and could assist in changing societal viewpoints over time (Pollitt & Oldfield, 2017; Reich-Shapiro, et al., 2021).

Societal expectations and gender stereotypes often serve as a barrier to those males who are seeking to enter the field of education. Mistry and Sood (2013) conducted a review of male early year teachers and leaders in schools and concluded that "stereotypes, perceived or real, of gender inequality, homophobia or identity need to be challenged and addressed by leadership" (p. 10). Thus, the role of mentors and support systems within TTP and school-based settings become essential in the recruitment and retention of male preservice teachers, who are developing their identities as male early elementary or middle level educators (Reich-Shapiro, et al., 2021).

Male preservice teachers are more likely to be singled out during their field placements by teachers and administrators to serve as a disciplinary figure and/or a male role model for students. Although this can contribute to a sense of otherness, male EE and MLE preservice teachers often benefit from the extra attention from school administrators, because they will

receive informal observations and advice during their demonstration lessons at higher frequency than their female counterparts (Tucker, 2015; Sargent 2000). Despite the calls for more male teachers from school districts and experts alike, few males pursue an EE or MLE certification. The support structures do not appear to outweigh the barriers.

Method

Below is a description of our methods for this study, including details about our participants, our survey instrument, and the focus groups.

Participants

A convenience sample was utilized in this study. The participating higher education institution is located in the northeast of the United States. The undergraduate student enrollment is about 4,000 students (46% male and 54% female). Ethnically, the college is about 78% White, 7% Hispanic, and 6% African American. Within the Department of Education, 97.3% of the student population is White. Sixty-eight percent of the full-time undergraduate students receive need-based financial aid. The Education department is one of the largest departments on campus with about 250 undergraduate students in eleven different programs of study. The EE major prepares preservice teachers to teach grades PreK-4, while the MLE major prepares preservice teachers to teach grades 4-8. A dual Special Education (SPE) major adds the certification to teach special education in grades PreK-8. In spring of 2019, 177 students were enrolled in the EE and MLE programs (including the dual SPE majors), which included 139 EE students and 38 in the MLE programs. Altogether, approximately 6% of these students were male. When separated, the MLE programs had a significantly higher percentage of males (13.2%) compared to the EE programs (4.3%).

An invitation to participate in the study was emailed to all of the male students who had declared as an EE, MLE, or SPE dual major. Data were collected over the course of two semesters through an online survey. Out of the 16 respondents, 11 (60%) fully completed the online survey instrument. Of the respondents, there were seven (43%) ECH majors, four (25%) ECH/SPE majors, two (13%) MLE major, and three (19%) MLE/SPE majors. Only one male student of color (0.5% of our sample) elected to participate in the study, and he was the only male of color enrolled in an EE or MLE program.

Demographic questions asked the participants to share the number of semesters completed at the university. Nine (56%) of the participants were juniors or seniors who had completed seven or more semesters at the university. Three (18.75%) were sophomores who had completed three or four semesters. Two (6.25%) had completed two semesters and were classified as freshmen. Three (18.75%) were transfer students completing their first semester and were classified as juniors.

Survey Instrument

The survey instrument employed was the *Barriers and Sources of Support for Male Preservice Teachers Survey* (see Appendix A). This survey instrument was adapted from a questionnaire created by Skelton (2003) for the purposes of having the preservice teachers self-assess their perceptions and experiences during their TPP as a male student. The survey included twenty-four Likert scale items organized into three subscales: demographics, perceptions of teacher preparation, perceptions of field experiences. These subscales were developed based on the characteristics of EE and MLE teachers found in the literature with the intention of assessing the influence of gender bias and expectations on the success of the male preservice teacher throughout a TPP. Descriptive statistics were utilized to analyze the qualitative data.

Focus Groups

Participants indicated their willingness to participate in semi-structured focus groups after completing the survey. Three focus groups were conducted with a total of nine participants: four were MLE or MLE/SPE majors and five were EE or EE/SPE. Half of the participants were in their final semester of coursework, having just completed student-teaching. The semi-structured interviews took place at the end of two semesters following the final exam period. Each focus group lasted approximately thirty minutes and consisted of a similar format, including the use of a narrative open-ended story script (see Appendix B). Asking open-ended questions allowed for the researchers to follow up on participants' comments with additional questions to gather more information about the topic.

Results & Data Analysis

Quantitative data indicated that male preservice teachers perceived the early elementary education or the middle level education profession to be desirable career paths for both male and females (see Table 1). Similarly, the participants overwhelmingly believed that it was vital to recruit both male and female teachers to the field and that sex or gender of the teacher was irrelevant (see Table 1). Only 37.5% (6) of the survey respondents strongly agreed that EE or MLE are well-respected careers, with 31.25% (5) somewhat agreeing and 25% (4) somewhat disagreeing or disagreeing with the statement (see Table 1). This data indicates a discrepancy between the societal viewpoint towards male EE or MLE teachers and the male EE or MLE preservice teachers' own beliefs. Participants were also asked to share their perceptions of the intellectual workload of the career. The majority (62.5%, n= 10) of the survey respondents strongly agreed, agreed or somewhat agreed that EE or MLE is as intellectually demanding as

secondary teaching, and overwhelmingly the participants disagreed that EE or MLE teachers are reasonably paid for the work involved in teaching (69%, *n*=11).

Table 1

Perceptions of EE and MLE Teaching Profession

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Somewhat Agree	Somewhat Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
EE or MLE is a career equally suitable for men and women	43.75% (*n*=7)	37.5% (*n*=6)	12.5% (*n*=2)	0% (*n*=0)	6.25% (*n*=1)	0% (*n*=0)
EE or MLE is as intellectually demanding as secondary teaching	37.5% (*n*=6)	18.75% (*n*=3)	6.25% (*n*=1)	37.5% (*n*=6)	0% (*n*=0)	0% (*n*=0)
EE or MLE is a well-respected career	25% (*n*=4)	18.75% (*n*=2)	31.25% (*n*=5)	12.50% (*n*=2)	12.5% (*n*=2)	0% (*n*=0)
EE or MLE teachers are reasonably paid for the work involved	0% (*n*=0)	6.25% (*n*=1)	18.75% (*n*=3)	31.25% (*n*=5)	43.75% (*n*=7)	0% (*n*=0)
It is vital that both male and female teachers are recruited to teach in EE or MLE	68.75% (*n*=11)	12.5% (*n*=2)	18.75% (*n*=3)	0% (*n*=0)	0% (*n*=0)	0% (*n*=0)
The sex or gender of teachers is irrelevant in EE or MLE.	6.25% (*n*=1)	31.25% (*n*=5)	37.5% (*n*=6)	6.25% (*n*=1)	18.75% (*n*=3)	0% (*n*=0)
More male teachers are needed as role-models in elementary grades.	31.25% (*n*=5)	31.25% (*n*=5)	37.5% (*n*=6)	0% (*n*=0)	0% (*n*=0)	0% (*n*=0)
Male teachers have a crucial part to play in fostering positive attitudes among boys.	18.75% (*n*=3)	56.25% (*n*=9)	25% (*n*=4)	0% (*n*=0)	0% (*n*=0)	0% (*n*=0)

Survey respondents were also asked several questions related to the perceptions of society towards male EE and MLE teachers. The majority (69%, *n*=11) of the respondents strongly agreed, agreed, somewhat agreed that the public tends to be wary of men who work with very young children. Next, participants shared their perceptions of how schools viewed men who work with very young children, while only 6.67% (1) participants strongly agreed with this statement, 46.67% (7) somewhat agreed, and 36.67% (4) somewhat disagreed or disagreed with this statement. At the same time, the participants shared their perception that more male teachers are needed as role models in EE and MLE (see Table 1). This data reflects the mixed societal viewpoints towards male teachers in EE or MLE. Finally, the participants rated their agreement with the statement "as society changes, men will feel more comfortable about wanting to work with children." Over 93% (15) participants strongly agreed, agreed or somewhat agreed with this statement (see Table 2).

Table 2

Perceptions of Society Towards Male EE and MLE Teachers

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Somewhat Agree	Somewhat Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Parents are more likely to encourage their daughters to train as K-8 teachers than their sons	26.67% (*n*=4)	26.67% (*n*=4)	31.25% (*n*=5)	6.67% (*n*=1)	6.67% (*n*=1)	0% (*n*=0)
The public tends to be wary of men who work with very young children.	13.33% (*n*=2)	40% (*n*=6)	26.67% (*n*=4)	20% (*n*=3)	0% (*n*=0)	0% (*n*=0)
Schools tend to be wary of men who work with very young children.	6.67% (*n*=1)	20% (*n*=3)	46.67% (*n*=7)	20% (*n*=3)	6.67% (*n*=1)	0% (*n*=0)
As society changes, men will feel more comfortable about wanting to work with children.	26.67% (*n*=4)	13.33% (*n*=2)	46.67% (*n*=7)	6.67% (*n*=1)	0% (*n*=0)	0% (*n*=0)

The qualitative data supports the themes which emerged from the focus group interviews. Three overarching themes emerged from our analysis of the focus group transcripts and survey data interpretation. Each theme is discussed below, combining qualitative and quantitative data gathered by the researchers.

Societal Expectations Contradict the Messages Preservice Teachers Receive From the School Districts

There is a perception that EE and MLE male teachers are needed to serve as role models for students. Eighty-seven and a half percent of our survey respondents agreed the male teachers were needed as role models within the elementary and middle level buildings. Their experiences in the field reinforced this idea for them. The interview participants shared that their CT would always comment that they would be quickly hired upon graduation. One interviewee stated "a lot of schools are looking for males, so I know that as long as I keep the grades good and do everything right, I have an increased chance over one of my female counterparts" (Interview Participant 3, May 2019). Many graduating students received increased interest from principals and superintendents when it came to hiring practices. These positive reactions from the administrators were affirming for the participants. One student stated "ever since I've been interviewing for jobs and stuff like that, I've noticed that my role and my skills are desired, and that's made me feel significantly better and that has propelled me through this process" (Interview Participant 2, May 2019).

Although they were strongly sought after by districts, there was still a social stigma that infiltrated participants' thought processes. Seventy-five percent of respondents *strongly agreed* or *agreed* with the statement: "The public is wary of men working with children." (see Table 2). The quantitative data was supported by comments from interview participants. There was an underlying message from other stakeholders in education that they, as male teachers, needed to be careful. One student shared his experience when a kindergarten student asked him for help buttoning his pants. He said:

> I try not to [help students button their pants]. I try to keep those interactions very minimal. I just try or if I do, it's right in front of a camera or something. And you know, most women don't even think twice about that. You tell your woman teacher to button your pants or zip…go ahead. Women don't even think twice, but with me I'm like…with my co-op, I'm like, "can you watch?' You know 'cause we have to save ourselves in that way. (Interview Participant 3, May 2019)

Another echoed "If a little kid asks to help button their pants, I'm doing that as a professional. I'm not being a creepy man" (Interview Participant 7, May 2019). The data clearly shows that there is a disconnect between what society says it wants (more male teachers) and how society actually views male teachers (potential pedophiles). This socially imposed barrier was noted by participants who felt few males pursued EE certification in part because of the assumption of pedophilia towards male teachers and the implications that they should have chosen a more academically challenging career because they are men (Sullivan, et al., 2022; Tucker, 2015). The participants felt these misconceptions were shared with them by their own families and their peer group. Plus, they experienced increased curiosity during their field placements, which also reinforced the social barrier of being a man in EE. Yet, at the same time, the participants all felt the districts were eager to have them teach in their buildings, especially to help handle behavioral issues and to motivate learners.

Announced Expectations for Male and Female Preservice Teachers Were the Same, but Actual Expectations Were Different in Reality

The participants shared strong opinions that good teaching is good teaching. They recognized that there are different teaching styles but did not attribute these differences to gender. One participant stated, "everybody teaches differently. You wouldn't be able to find two

teachers that teach exactly the same way, and I think you have to look at each individual person. It's hard to divide it by gender" (Interview Participant 4, May 2019). A majority (62.5%, *n*=10) of survey respondents indicated that they did not feel that the sex or gender of teachers was relevant in K-8 schools (see Table 1). The focus group interviewees felt that in the K-12 classrooms the administration, CTs, and supervising teachers maintained the same standards regarding their lesson delivery and content knowledge. Yet, when asked to share their perceptions about discipline as it related to gender, five (31%) of the participants *strongly agreed* or *agreed* that female teachers have a harder time disciplining boys.

During the interviews, several of the participants shared that female CTs asked them to fill in the male role of disciplinarian and address inappropriate behaviors. One participant shared an experience from one of his field placements where a middle school student was looking at inappropriate things on the laptop and the CT said "Hey you're a male. This might carry more weight if you say this to him. So I got the chance to have that sort of conversation with a student, but it was not a fun conversation" (Interview Participant 1, May 2019). Another participant shared a similar experience of being asked to step in as a disciplinarian: "I think men are looked at a little bit more to even break up fights or control. Like, crowd control…where it's like, he's gonna be able to control that situation better" (Interview Participant 2, May 2019). While the stated expectation was that both male and female preservice teachers would be equally responsible for discipline, the hidden curriculum revealed that males were more often prompted to handle misbehavior in the classroom.

All participants shared that the support of female CTs, who acted as mother figures during their placements by sharing words of caution, mentoring, and acting as a role model for them, played a critical role in their success. They shared that many CTs were surprised by a male

EE or MLE teacher candidate which resulted in more informal observations by teachers and administration, who just wanted to see the male student teacher. “I was the only male in that school besides the gym teacher. And he was getting ready for retirement, so I was a young male to [teachers]. And I walked around that school looking like a unicorn” (Interview Participant 5, December 2019). Although focus group participants claimed there was not a difference between genders, male preservice teachers seemed to receive more support in their field placements.

The study participants felt a disparity in expectations in their college classrooms, where they did not feel their female peers had high expectations of them. One student shared that female peers frequently made comments that he would get a job right away, regardless of his GPA or performance in college coursework, because he was a male teacher. He said:

> It shouldn’t be the case. I could get terrible grades and just slack off, and get terrible grades all four years, but they’re like, “Oh you’re a guy and there’s a girl who had a 4.0 and she’s got six different references? Fantastic.” And I’m just like this, bum, which came out of the education program. They’re like “you’re a guy, you’re in.” (Interview Participant 1, December 2019)

The participants experienced other education majors questioning their work and if they had really created their projects. One student shared: “There were many times where I brought in projects and they said, “oh did you get that off Teachers Pay Teachers?” (Interview Participant 4, May 2019). This judgment of their student products ties into the societal perception that the male teachers are underachievers.

Unfortunately, the participants also felt that certain professors seemed to expect the male candidates to be less successful than a female EE major. This held true to a lesser extent for MLE majors. The participants shared instances where they were questioned by a professor about

their major choice. One student stated he was "honestly afraid to speak up" with any doubts he might have because "as soon as you bring up doubts about teaching, their first instinct is like, at least to me, it feels like they say, 'Well, it's not meant for you' (Interview Participant 1, May 2019). This sentiment was similarly expressed by other students who felt some professors were eager to counsel the men out of the major. The participants were surprised, frustrated, and disappointed by the perceived lack of support from their professors. One participant stated "knowing my role as a male, I thought that I would be valued and welcomed, and I thought that other people would be supportive of me" (Interview Participant 3, December 2019). The assumption that the males were less capable translated into the professors' assumptions related to the quality of work. The focus group interviewees felt that there was a pressure to create *cute* classroom activities over creating *effective* teaching materials. One participant defended his position: "Even in Kindergarten most of my stuff wasn't necessarily cute, but it got through to the kids, and my scores showed it." He continued "I was very practical. So the way I teach is not going to be artsy, colorful, and everything, but I'm effective" (Interview Participant 3, May 2019). While the male preservice teachers felt pressure to make things look cute or colorful in elementary classrooms, they strongly believed that the focus should be on the creation of effective teaching materials, not the level of cuteness.

While Sometimes the Male Preservice Teachers Felt a Sense of Collectiveness, There was Still Often a Sense of Otherness

Many male teachers in EE and MLE programs experience a sense of otherness while also feeling a sense of collectiveness and belonging. Collectiveness refers to a sense of belonging to a group (Mistry & Sood, 2013). One respondent shared, "It's kind of a shock at first to see a guy in some of these classes sometimes, but I think everyone's very accepting to us in the classes."

(Interview Participant 2, May 2019). While there was a sense of collectiveness, which developed over time within the TPP as well as out in the districts, there was an underlying current of sexism which remained between the peers. For example, the participants felt judged when they responded to in-class discussions. One student shared a time he brought in an article about a special education topic to share in class and he was "talking about how I got upset by the article, and I teared up and everybody looks at me like, what's wrong? But, why would you cry?" (Interview participant 4, December 2019). While they were qualified educators, the group dynamics shifted when they were engaged with their female peers. The participants revealed that they did not always feel comfortable being the only male in the TPP classes and confided that they sometimes felt singled out by professors. While participants did not feel that they had been discriminated against within the TPP, one participant stated, "I need to always work harder to prove myself" (Interview Participant 6, December 2019). The need to prove themselves in the college classroom or speak from the male perspective is frequently identified as a barrier in the literature (Cruickshank et al., 2021). The sense of isolation and a need to justify their belonging in the EE or MLE major is a barrier to the male preservice teachers persisting in the major.

Discussion

In reviewing the data, there were several key findings, some of which have broader implications for the recruitment and retention of men in EE and MLE. First, the role of teacher preparation programs play in providing a learning environment where male preservice teachers are able to thrive. Second, the perceived barriers the male EE and MLE students must overcome during their TPP. Finally, the perceived support structures essential to their thriving and persisting in the TPP.

Role of Teacher Preparation Programs

The first research question sought to understand the barriers and support structures male preservice teachers in EE and MLE programs experience during this TPP. While academically the participants felt that they were held to similar expectations as the female students, they felt their female peers and professors often questioned their motives and ability to be successful in the EE or MLE program. The skepticism from their peer group was short lived, but professors persisted in questioning their work effort and quality throughout the program. Participants did not indicate that there were any formal support structures present in the program that were unique for male preservice teachers. Similar findings are seen in the research (Cruickshank et al., 2021), where the male preservice teachers self-isolate, choosing the path of least resistance, as a coping mechanism to blend into their TPP. Results indicated that the participants sought out other male preservice teachers within the program creating an informal peer support system.

Despite the many barriers to becoming an EE or MLE, all participants were successful during their TPP. These participants were asked to share their advice with future teacher candidates. Collectively, they stated that if you could survive the TPP, you would be hired and to be proud of themselves and their work. One participant stated, “Just keep moving forward cause your role is important and once you get in the job hunt people are gonna really value you.”

Perceived Barriers to the Profession

The second research question sought to understand perceived barriers for male preservice teachers in EE or MLE programs to persist in the major or entry into the profession. Concerns from society, peers, and colleagues raised the scrutiny of the male preservice teachers to behave impeccably. These concerns forced them to constantly be on watch especially with engaging in any sort of physical contact with students. A certain degree of physical contact with students

when teaching early grades is required, as younger students may need assistance with jacket zippers and buttons as well as this student population tends to be more naturally affectionate, sharing high fives and hugs. All of these behaviors are naturally assumed by female teachers, who society expects to be more nurturing, but caring behaviors become a barrier to the field of education for male preservice teachers, who are often judged with a different standard with regard to physical contact (Pollitt & Oldfield, 2017). Within this same space exists mixed messaging as K-12 school districts actively look to recruit male EE and MLE teachers with caring dispositions. Perhaps it is because of these mixed messages that the participants shared feelings of surprise that these societal stereotypes were a reality within the TPP and their EE and MLE field experiences. One student stated:

> I always thought that it was hypocritical, like I hear people say that stereotype… if you teach in a younger grade, people will be scared of you or you might be a sex predator or something, And then, also at the same time, people bitch all the time about… 'Oh we don't have enough male role models or kids don't have people to look up to.

All of the interviewees were hopeful that these differences would go away as more males decided to become EE teachers. Changing these negative perceptions of the teaching profession, especially as it relates to males, is a difficult task.

Similarly, a barrier to their success in the program stemmed from lack of acceptance from their female peers as well as the development of their identity as a male educator. Some of the negative perceptions towards male EE and MLE teachers that the participants shared came from male CTs. The interviewees all noted that they had at least one experience with a male CT during their field experience. They felt the stereotype of the "lazy male teacher" was perpetuated by the male CTs that they worked with during their field experience who were laid back and

disorganized in their communication and classroom. This same "lazy male teacher stereotype" was how they felt their female peers and professors viewed them. Participants shared experiences during their coursework where they were questioned by female peers if the assignments being submitted were actually their own work.

Another challenge to their identity as a male EE or MLE teacher came from the TPP course professors. The participants shared their perception that the course professors expected the male candidates to be less successful in the program. One interviewee shared "I think they expected me to do poorer on assignments than the female students." The lack of support from TPP professors was a significant barrier to the field from the viewpoint of the participants. TPPs and school districts need to work together to change the negative stereotypes and provide support structures within to help reshape the collective identity of male educators (Cruickshank et al., 2021; Mistry & Sood, 2013; Pollitt & Oldfield, 2017).

Perceived Support Structures

The third research question sought to understand perceived structures for support for male preservice teachers in EE or MLE programs to persist in the major or entry into the profession. The importance of familial, mentor, and peer support in the pursuit of an EE or MLE teaching career has been shown to play a significant role in the decision-making process of choosing to pursue education as a career path (Malaby & Ramsey, 2010). While the study did not find any formal support structures within TPPs designed specifically for male students, the participants were able to identify informal support structures that contributed to their success in the TPP. One source of support came from cooperating teachers and administrators in their field placements, which served as a source of affirmation and motivation to persist in the program. One participant shared that his CT told him "Man, they're gonna snatch you quicker, because

they need more men to interact with the kids." Another candidate shared his takeaway, from being in the field experience placements with CTs and administrators, that male preservice teachers need to just survive the TPP because they are "going to be really valued once they get hired." They also felt and sought out support from each other and (eventually) their female classmates.

These findings echo the findings of Cruickshank et al (2021) whose participants found support amongst their male peers during their classes on campus. The participants' own desire to become EE or MLE educators seemed to be the strongest factor in students' abilities to persist. They persisted in spite of a dearth of formal support structures. Thus, the role of mentors and support systems within TPP becomes essential in the recruitment and retention of male preservice teachers as they develop their identity as a male early elementary or middle level educator.

Limitations

The generalizability of this study is limited due to the small sample size and along with the nature of descriptive research. A second limitation of this study was the validity of the survey instrument. Further research is needed to ensure validity of the adapted survey instrument. However, the findings of this study do inform future research in the field. Replicating the study with other IHEs across the nation would provide valuable insight. While it was beyond the scope of this study, further investigation is warranted to understand: are there differences between males who decide to pursue EE degrees versus MLE? How does race factor into TTP for male preservice teachers? As an underrepresented population in education, male students deserve additional attention. Further research could provide valuable insight that could affect the ways in which male students are recruited to the teaching profession.

Call to Action

The findings of this study contribute to the limited research on the perceptions of male preservice teachers experiences in TPP as well as serve as a call to action. Our participants' advice to future male preservice teachers was overwhelmingly positive and focused on the end goal of becoming certified teachers. The advice was also insightful acknowledging that the barriers are social constructs, which could be changed over time. The voices of these participants highlight the need for TPPs to provide formal scaffolded support for male teacher candidates as they navigate the contradictory messages regarding their major choice. This advice should be a wakeup call to TPPs; male preservice teachers pursuing EE and MLE are expressing their concerns and resiliency, but these students are not experiencing the necessary systems of support from their TPPs. TPPs have an opportunity to develop formal scaffold support systems targeting this underserved student population. Support systems should include structured peer groups of both upper and lower students (providing both social and academic support); mentoring opportunities (e.g., from college professors, practicing male educators, and school administrators); as well as continued support beyond graduation, during the first years of teaching. Partnerships between school districts and IHEs are another pipeline to developing, fostering, and retaining male EE and MLE teachers. It would also be beneficial for TPPs to use their IHE recruitment and marketing tools as a way to build cohorts of male EE and MLE preservice teachers. It is time for TPPs to advocate for their underrepresented male preservice EE and MLE teachers.

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Appendix A

Barriers and Sources of Support for Male Preservice Teachers Survey

Demographic Questions:

1. Current enrollment status for the current semester
    a. Full-time student (12 or more credits)
    b. Part-time students (11.5 or fewer credits)
2. Please indicate the number of semesters completed in college.
3. What is your current major?

Perceptions of Teacher Preparation Questions:

1. K-8 teaching is a career equally suitable for both men and women.
2. K-8 teaching is as intellectually demanding as secondary teaching.
3. K-8 teaching is a stressful occupation.
4. K-8 teaching involves excessive paperwork.
5. K-8 teaching is a well-respected career.
6. K-8 teaching is reasonably paid for the work involved.
7. K-8 teaching provides men and women with the same opportunities for promotion.
8. Men entering K-8 schools are strongly motivated to work with children.
9. Men enter K-8 schools because it provides them with a rapid means of career advancement.
10. Secondary education attracts better qualified students than ECH (PK-4) education.
11. Secondary education attracts better qualified students than MLE (4-8) education.
12. Parents are more likely to encourage their daughters to train as K-8 teachers than their sons.
13. As society changes, men will feel more comfortable about wanting to work with children.

Perceptions of Field Experiences

14. Female teachers often have better communication skills than male teachers.
15. Female teachers are generally more caring than male teachers.
16. Female teachers have a harder time disciplining boys than male teachers.
17. The sex or gender of teachers is irrelevant in K-8 schools.
18. It is vital that both male and female teachers are recruited to teach grades K-8.
19. Students identify more readily with teachers of the same sex.
20. Male teachers have a crucial part to play in fostering positive attitudes among young boys.
21. More male teachers are needed as role-models in elementary grades.
22. Increasing the number of men teaching K-8 will enhance the status of this sector of education.
23. The public tends to be wary of men who work with very young children.
24. Schools tend to be wary of men who work with very young children.

Edited from: Skelton, C. (2003). Male primary teachers and perceptions of masculinity. *Educational Review, 55*(2), 195-209.

Appendix B

Focus Group Questions

1. Why did you choose to major in education?
    a. What specifically drew you to the field?
2. What grade/type of school would be your ideal job?
3. What did you expect an education major to be like?
    a. How has your understanding of the major changed?
4. What are some things that have caused you to question whether education is a good fit for you?
    a. What are the drawbacks to being a male in education?
    b. Probe: Specific people (family, friends, faculty), courses, experiences
5. What are some things that made you believe education was a good fit for you?
    a. What are the benefits to being a male in education?
    b. Probe: Specific people (family, friends, faculty), courses, experiences
6. Have you ever felt uncomfortable during your education courses? Why or why not?
    a. Probe specific instances as necessary
7. Do you believe you have experienced discrimination in education because of your sex? Why or why not?
    a. Probe regarding field experience placement
8. Do you believe you have experienced privilege in education because of your sex? Why or why not?
    a. Probe regarding field experience placement
    b. Ask about job prospects
9. Do you think male and female teachers teach differently? Explain.
10. Do you believe your role in the classroom or school will be different than your female colleagues?