

Analyzing the Impact of Gender on Depictions of Touch in Early Childhood Textbooks

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Abstract

Early childhood contexts often enact "common-sense identities" that create and sustain the notion that teachers of young children are expressly female and heterosexual. It has also been argued that touch is a key difference between men and women in early childhood classrooms. This exploratory study examined 10 early childhood textbooks to determine whether images depicting touch enacted these common-sense notions. To investigate whether implicit gendered messages existed within the texts, images displaying touch between teachers and children were grouped according to three main recurrent themes: teacher touching child, child touching teacher, and mutually negotiated contact. Findings indicated that, although the images of male teachers were positive, troubling patterns did emerge concerning the type and nature of men's contact with children. These patterns worked to reaffirm larger patriarchal structures at play in schools and society while simultaneously painting women as more suitable to nurture young children. Furthermore, the texts provided clear messages to beginning teachers that acceptable types of touch were delineated by gender. The article concludes with a discussion of the implications of these findings for early childhood preservice teacher education.

Introduction

Recent research efforts have articulated that men teaching in early childhood contexts represent between 1% and 4% of all early childhood education (ECED) teachers, depending on the study and/or context (Cameron, 2001; Farquhar, 1997). A few countries have successfully recruited men into ECED contexts and raised the percentage of men working with young children to approximately 8% (Sumsion, 2005). Conversely, in the United States, men represent roughly 2% of all teachers in preschool and kindergarten classrooms (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2007, p. 29). The dearth of male teachers has also been a recurring issue in the early primary grades (1-3) in the United States (Cooney & Bittner, 2001; Sargent, 2004). Some data further suggest that the number of men working in ECED has continued to decline over the past decade (Farquhar, Cablk, Buckingham, Butler, & Ballantyne, 2006). Researchers have argued that the dearth of male teachers is the result of multiple factors related to the feminized nature of ECED teaching (Allan, 1993; Sargent, 2005). In this sense, early childhood contexts often enact "common-sense identities" that create and sustain the notion that teachers of young children are expressly female and heterosexual (Fifield & Swain, 2002). This study investigated the degree to which ECED textbooks enact these "common-sense identities" and further solidify socialized notions of gender.

Textbooks represent primary sources of information for preservice teachers in teacher education programs (Nicol & Crespo, 2006). Thus, we investigated whether gendered messages existed within the texts. We chose to focus on aspects of touch because it has often been described as a key difference between men and women in the ECED classroom (Cooney & Bittner, 2001). Touch can also speak to the level of comfort and trust between both teacher and child. Touch is also generally understood to be an essential element in the development of young children. However, we also argue that touch embodies not only the nurturing nature of ECED teaching but also the embedded constructs of femininity that also pervade the teaching of young children. It is our hypothesis that textbook images can provide insights into the implicit gendered rules that govern acceptable touch in the ECED classroom. We discuss touch in more detail later in the article.

Review of the Literature

ECED as a Gendered Profession

ECED teaching is an example of a gendered profession that is organized by images, symbols, and social understandings that allow for great distinctions in the enactment of gender roles (Sargent, 2005). In particular, women are viewed as the nurturing mother, and men wishing to work in this context are often assumed to be effeminate, homosexual, and/or pedophiles (Blount, 2005; Fifield & Swain, 2002; Weems, 1999). Farquhar et al. (2006) argued that this position drives both homosexual and heterosexual men from wanting to work with young children—further reducing the presence of men in ECED. King (1998) asserts that teaching in the early childhood portion of life has been assumed to be an "act of caring." King continues, saying that caring at all levels of teaching is important. This caring has been attributed to women, and therefore early childhood teaching has been deemed "women's work." Using this notion of a gendered profession, many researchers have uncovered numerous issues facing men in these contexts. The next section highlights some of the issues facing men working in ECED contexts and questions the benefit of men working with young children.

Touch in the ECED Classroom

Certainly the issues surrounding touch in the ECED classroom are on the minds of many educators working with young children. Children need touch to develop mentally, physically, and emotionally, yet we have seen a proliferation of "no-touch" policies over the past few decades (Tobin, 1997). Carlson (2003) argued that touch has been diminishing in ECED classrooms for two key reasons: (1) the "risk of accusation often outweighs the benefit of touch to the child" and (2) a lack of "understanding about what constitutes appropriate touch to young children" (p. 5). This fear and confusion allow teachers to rationalize an absence of touch within their classrooms. This problem seems to be particularly acute for male early childhood teachers. Male teachers often perceive differential rules regarding touch as compared to their female colleagues (Sargent, 2005). Even when men understand the role of appropriate touch, they fear that others (parents, colleagues, etc.) may misconstrue their actions and worry that they will be viewed as pedophiles (Cooney & Bittner, 2001). Male ECED teachers often use these factors to describe their perception of the implicit rules surrounding touch in the classroom and how gender structures the types of touch that are acceptable with children.

Theoretical Framework

Notions of Gender

Enacting notions of gender is not a simple matter. There is no one-way to be male or female. Gender is a fluid concept that is multilayered, contextual, and based in patriarchal notions of power (Weedon, 1997). In addition, gender roles are individually crafted within this larger social context and often are in direct contrast to the opposing gender (Connell, 1987). In this article, we envision gender as a continuum of socially constructed behavior where we have internalized ideals for what it means to act in male or female ways. However, males and females can and do carry out behaviors across this socially constructed continuum. We are interested in how ECED textbooks represent the roles of male and female teachers and how to investigate how these textbooks represent the teacher's role based on gender.

Textbook "Common Sense"

Nicol and Crespo (2006) point to an increased interest in studying how textbooks promote teacher learning. Textbooks are also utilized to further demonstrate how early childhood educators view the teaching of young children through a lens of "biological essentialism" in which women are seen in the role of nurturing mother figure and males represent the polar opposite—rendering them unsuitable as teachers of young children (Weems, 1999, p. 30).

Preservice teacher education programs can help men and women to envision their actions, thoughts, and beliefs in the context of larger society and to realize that we often enact gender based on our "common sense." Textbooks offer insights into the gendered nature of ECED teaching and strengthen the unwritten rules surrounding what is appropriate for men and women when working with children. Snyder and Broadway (2004) support this notion of meanings embedded within textbooks in their critique of biology texts:

The knowledge within textbooks is not neutral, but the result of complex power relations and struggles among identifiable groups, i.e., gender, sex, race,

nationality, and sexuality. This knowledge can be viewed as either giving students a set of tools from which they can create their own physical and social future, or as controlling their future by instilling cultural dangers that threaten the dominant normative morality. (p. 623)

This passage provides an argument for the messages that are implicit in the texts that we use with students. Texts are social, political, and cultural products. Furthermore, textbooks help to sustain the implicit structure within society through the portrayal of subjective visions of reality (Apple, 1990). We therefore align ourselves with Whatley's (1988) claim, "Photographs, therefore, can have more impact on students reading a textbook, since, even if they are posed, they may be seen as true, objective pictures of reality" (p. 120). In a textbook, photographs accompanying a topic may be remembered more clearly than the text itself. Postmodern theorists would argue that no text or photograph could be analyzed to determine one essential meaning. Meaning is contextual because every person produces meaning based on prior experience, which shapes how he or she interprets the present (Werstch, 1991). Despite meaning being individualized, we can argue that certain groups (from similar social locations) may interpret images in similar ways and provide a basis for analysis.

However, given a particular historical/political moment, it is legitimate to argue for the presence of certain *dominant* meanings in cultural texts and photographs. Textbook readers in similar social contexts share in similar cultural discourses, and it is therefore possible to speak of predictable ways in which a text or photograph may be read (Whatley, 1988, p. 140).

Textbooks therefore represent a powerful tool to better understand the implicit structure and gendered frameworks that make up early childhood teaching. This conclusion, in turn, makes analyzing the images within the text a beginning point to understand how gender is presented to preservice teachers through the official lens of ECED texts.

Research Question

This study addressed the following question: Do selected texts provide implicit rules concerning the nature of acceptable touch for male teachers in ECED classrooms?

Data Collection and Analysis

Better understanding for the ways in which both women and men are implicitly represented in texts would provide an interesting baseline for how to begin challenging normative notions of gender. Therefore, the study began with an analysis of ECED texts carried out by the researchers. This focus was to investigate how male teachers were represented across a sample of ECED texts designed for preservice teachers. The following section more clearly delineates the data collection process within this study.

This research effort was a small-scale exploratory study to investigate whether there was any credence to the idea that gender differences were depicted in text images. To answer this question, we determined specific criteria for the selection of texts. We focused solely on texts dealing with children in prekindergarten through third grade. If texts were designed for children in elementary classrooms (K-6) or included middle school (K-8), they were not selected. Texts also had to contain images of teachers and children working together. If texts contained no images or if the photos only represented children, they were not selected. Gender representation of the teachers played no role in the initial selection of the texts.

Texts also needed to be recently published. We arbitrarily limited the texts to ones published after the year 2000 (the oldest text used in the study was published in 2002) in an effort to investigate books most likely still being used in teacher education programs. In some cases, texts were selected based on their use in our own teacher education program (Chaillé & Britain, 2003; Essa, 2003; Gartrell, 2007; Morrison, 2006). Others were chosen because they were currently being marketed to university professors and/or were well-respected ECED texts (Brewer, 2004; Chaillé, 2008; Harlan & Rivkin, 2008; Hendrick & Weissman, 2006; Perry, 2004; Seefeldt & Galper, 2002). Two science texts were included—mainly because the first author was teaching a science methods course at the time of the study. All the texts used in this study were currently in print and currently being marketed for use in teacher preparation courses. These criteria made these texts appropriate choices for analysis.

The study utilized Whatley's (1988) framework for analyzing text images. In Whatley's study titled "Photographic Images of Blacks in Sexuality Texts," she interpreted possible meanings by placing those images within the larger culturally dominant view. She argued that the dearth of diverse images in the text provided even more powerful messages than when diverse images were utilized. These factors make her study a particularly good fit for analyzing and contrasting the images of men and women within ECED texts. Men are certainly a minority in the gendered culture of ECED teaching, and when images of men appear in texts, the behaviors of those men can send powerful messages to students about how men should engage with children.

Using a poststructural feminist lens (Weedon, 1997), the text images were scrutinized with an understanding that gendered messages in the texts were not neutral or happening by chance. We cataloged every image from the chosen texts to provide a master list of images. Once all images were listed, we focused solely on images that portrayed teachers and children together. These images were further reduced by separating images in which there was no contact between child and teacher from photos that depicted clear physical contact between teacher and child. We surmised that textbooks would shed light on the implicit rules of engagement for men in ECED contexts. These images provided the context to investigate whether implicit gendered messages existed within ECED textbooks.

Following Whatley's (1988) lead for analyzing images, we created overarching themes to further reduce the depictions of gender particularly focused on contact between teacher and child. The following themes emerged from the analysis:

- *TTC* (teacher touching child): This theme is best described as a part of a teacher's body touching a child while the child is engaged in an activity (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Example of *TTC*—a teacher touching a child's shoulder while the child is looking through a magnifying glass.

- *CTT* (child touching teacher): This theme is similar to the first category; however, it is the child who is contacting the teacher (Figure 2).



Figure 2. Example of *CTT*—a child touching a teacher's

wrist while the teacher is holding an object to observe.

- *MNC* (mutually negotiated contact): This theme is best described as both the child and teacher engaging in contact that is acceptable to both individuals—for example, a child and teacher leaning against one another while reading (Figure 3).



Figure 3. Example of *MNC*—children leaning against teacher and teacher's arm wrapped around child.

Lastly, we kept track of the total number of teachers and their corresponding genders represented within the texts in an effort to understand the overall representation of gender in ECED texts.

Findings and Discussion

We would be remiss if we did not disclose that we felt these texts were excellent texts with respect to working with young children. Our use of these textbooks is an attempt to better understand the implicit rules of engagement surrounding touch in the classroom, not an effort to discredit or condemn the work of the authors or publishers of these works. We feel that evaluating how both male and female teachers are represented in images will expose “common-sense” constructions of gender in ECED. This analysis hopes to provide guidance and understanding for how to represent both men and women in more inclusive ways.

Using the above categories, we were able to depict all representations of teachers working with children in the classroom context. All images fit within the three overarching themes (TTC, CTT, and *MNC*). Despite men only representing approximately 2% of all teachers of children from birth to age 8 (Sargent, 2004, 2005), they represented 11.5% of the images of teachers within these texts. This overrepresentation may be an indication that the authors or publishers of these texts may have deliberately tried to demonstrate men engaging with children in the classroom. It is important to note that the process for selecting photos is not exclusively up to the author of the text. In many cases, publishers select images from stock photos, and any bias represented may not necessarily reflect the thoughts of the professional teacher educator. The overrepresentation of men in these texts may be a reflection of a marketing decision by publishers as opposed to a reflection of the beliefs held by ECED authors. In either case, the user of these texts could easily interpret that men do have an important role in the education of young children.

In total, 261 images of teachers and children did not depict touch. Of these 261 total images, 231 images represented female teachers (88.5%) and 30 images depicted male teachers (11.5%). In terms of touch, 93 total images portrayed some form of contact between a teacher and child. Female teachers were contacting children in 83 of the 93 total images, which represented roughly 89.3%. Conversely, male teachers were contacting children in 10 of 93 images, approximately 10.7%. Interestingly, these numbers are roughly equivalent to the total overall depictions of male and female teachers within the books (see Table 1). This finding provided more evidence that publishers or authors were clearly focused on representing men and women on a more equal footing in terms of their roles within the classroom. However, upon closer inspection, the findings indicate that textbooks represented men and women differently with regard to the type and nature of acceptable touch with children.

Table 1
Summation of Images Based on Teacher Gender

ECED Text	Total Images of Teachers with Children		Total Images Depicting Touch	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
Brewer (2004)	3	18	1	8
Chaille & Britain (2003)	0	5	0	1
Chaille (2008)	0	1	0	0
Essa (2003)	6	72	0	25
Gartrell (2007)	4	54	3	25
Harlan & Rivkin (2008)	2	10	1	4
Hendrick & Weissman (2006)	4	28	2	11
Morrison (2006)	9	32	3	7
Perry (2004)	1	7	0	1
Seefeldt & Galper (2002)	1	4	0	1
Totals	30	231	10	83
Percentage of Images	11.5	88.5	10.7	89.3

Teacher Touching Child

This category (TTC) is best described as a teacher reaching out and touching a child. A typical example can be seen in Harlan and Rivkin (2008) where a female teacher places her hand on the back of a male child while he plays a harp (p. 285). This category contained the most striking differences of any of the text categories. The overall representation of male teachers across the selected texts was approximately 11.5%. Further, 10.7% of all images depicting touch demonstrated touch between a male teacher and a child. Thus, we were interested in how the differing types of touch compared to those baseline percentages. The TTC category depicted 49 images of women reaching out to children, equivalent to 96.1% of all images within this category. Only two of the photos depicted a male teacher reaching out to a child (exemplified by a male teacher helping a child roll up his sleeve—Gartrell, 2007, p. 199). This equated to a mere 3.9% of TTC images depicting a male teacher reaching out to touch a child (see Table 2).

In the case of TTC, males reaching out to children could be construed as an aggressive move toward a child because of the cultural socialized understandings of men as powerful. This socialized understanding of men filters into early childhood contexts to create a profile of male teachers as disciplinarians. Thus, when male teachers reach out to touch a child, it could be interpreted as a method of control. In contrast, people often assume that when a woman reaches out to a child it is an act of nurturing guidance and support for the child. These interpretations are extensions of the “common-sense” notion of gender that pervades those working and studying in the ECED contexts. Feminist researchers warn that these common-sense ideas help to structure the world and clearly define what we consider to be masculine and feminine (Weedon, 1997; Weems, 1999).

Child Touching Teacher

This category (CTT) focuses on children reaching out to their teachers and making contact with teachers' bodies. In general, these images were far less common than the images within other categories (9 total images). An example of this type of image is best exemplified in Morrison (2006), where several children are sitting at a table with a male teacher and one of the children has her hand placed on the teacher's arm. There were four images of male teachers and five female teachers being contacted by children. These drastically different representations (as compared with TTC) provided important insight into the nature of acceptable forms of touch in the classroom. Male teachers

represented 11% of the total images in all texts, yet they represented over 44% of the images in this category (see Table 2). Readers of these texts could assume that it is far less dangerous and more acceptable for a child to reach out to touch a male teacher as opposed to the teacher initiating contact.

Interestingly, when we consider the vastly different representations here, it reaffirms to the reader that the main role of an ECED teacher is that of nurturer. It could be interpreted that in order to effectively nurture children a teacher should be actively reaching out to children as opposed to forcing children to reach out to their teachers. When we consider the overrepresentation of males in this category, it supports the notion that men are not represented as natural nurturers of children.

Another possible interpretation of these images lies in feminist poststructural critiques of patriarchal power. Weedon (1997) argued that the composition of images provides meanings and structure to our experiences and implicitly sustains the "organization of social power" (p. 23). In this sense, a young child reaching out to a male teacher is reminiscent of the child striving for the acceptance of the male role model. The role model argument (as presented by Allan, 1994) is steeped in notions of patriarchy, and these notions come through in the images within this theme.

Mutually Negotiated Contact

This category can best be described as the children and teacher engaging in contact that both parties have agreed upon. An example from Essa (2003) shows a female teacher and two female children hugging one another (p. 403). We felt at the outset of this research endeavor that the MNC category would be the least represented category of male teacher images; however, 12% of MNC images included depictions of men engaging in mutual contact with their children, which roughly mimics the overall representation of teacher gender in all texts (see Table 2).

Because both teacher and child are engaging in contact with one another, it can be argued that the child is in a less threatening situation and still has some control about the nature of the contact. In all four examples of male teachers in this category, the teachers were engaging in contact exclusively with male children. This depiction could be a remnant of the notion that it is acceptable for men to engage with children (particularly male children) in rough and tumble ways, including children physically climbing onto male teachers. Conversely, female teachers routinely contacted children of both sexes across the 29 MNC images within the texts. These images certainly send a mixed message to the readers of the text, where, apparently, it is acceptable for men to contact male children but not female children.

Only two texts depicted male MNC images; interestingly, men authored both texts. We questioned whether these images appeared in male-authored texts only by coincidence. We wondered whether the male authors of these texts were able to influence the publisher's selection of photos. Under this premise, we could argue that male early childhood authors were working to deconstruct societal expectations placed on men and striving to present men in contexts not usually associated with "manliness." Thus, images depicting men embracing and caring for children can send powerful messages to male preservice teachers and, perhaps more importantly, their female colleagues—that is, men engaging in nurturing behavior is not unusual.

Our "common sense" can cloud judgment and help us to construct broad assumptions about the benefits of male presence in ECED classrooms. For instance, it is sometimes argued that many children today have very little contact with adult men, and subsequently male children need male role models in classrooms (Allan, 1994). Under scrutiny, these "common-sense" arguments have little value and even less empirical evidence. Some studies have asserted that most single mothers report that their children did in fact have regular contact with male role models (Farquhar et al., 2006; McBride & Rane, 1996). The presence of men in ECED will do little to problematize the normative stereotypes of male and female behavior, and often men can even strengthen those stereotypes in children (Cunningham, 1999; Roulston & Mills, 2000). Sumsion (2005) argued, "only male early childhood teachers who actively challenge traditional gender power structures are likely to challenge children's traditional and limiting constructions of gender" (p. 112). Similarly, textbook representations can provide powerful messages for preservice teachers and help them conceptualize a broader view of the role of appropriate touch in the classroom.

Table 2
Summation of Themes Representing Touch

ECED Text	Teacher Touching Child		Child Touching Teacher		Mutually Negotiated Contact	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Brewer (2004)	0	5	1	1	0	2
Chaille & Britain (2003)	0	1	0	0	0	0
Chaille (2008)	0	0	0	0	0	0
Essa (2003)	0	15	0	2	0	8
Gartrell (2007)	1	16	0	0	2	9
Harlan & Rivkin (2008)	0	4	1	0	0	0
Hendrick & Weissman (2006)	1	3	1	2	0	6
Morrison (2006)	0	5	1	0	2	2
Perry (2004)	0	0	0	0	0	1
Seefeldt & Galper (2002)	0	0	0	0	0	1
Totals	2	49	4	5	4	29
Percentage of Images	3.9	96.1	44.4	55.5	12.1	87.9

Implications and Conclusions

We realize that there are limitations to this small-scale exploratory study. For instance, we chose only a limited number of texts to investigate whether possible patterns of male teacher representation existed within ECED texts. Consequently, we do not claim that these 10 texts provide a definitive view of all representations of ECED teaching. However, this research effort has provided some baseline evidence that men and women are represented differently within a sampling of ECED texts. This conclusion has serious implications for preservice teacher educators, authors, and publishers working in ECED contexts.

As an effort to protect children, men are usually subjected to unwritten policies that restrict them from touching or coming into close contact with children (Murray, 1996). These unwritten rules are perceived early in teaching careers, as evidenced by Cooney and Bittner's (2001) study with male preservice teachers. Men in ECED understood that the rules for engaging with children were different for males as opposed to their female counterparts. These implicit rules were reflected in ECED texts and may have possibly helped support preservice teachers envisioning "appropriate" touch differently for men and women. The men represented in these texts seemed to be enacting what James King (1998) termed "safe" behaviors when working with children. King argued that male ECED teachers would purposefully refrain from touching or nurturing children for fear that it could misconstrued as acting outside of their normative gender identity and draw unwanted attention to them personally and professionally. The textual depiction of male teachers engaging in these "safe" behaviors further instills that male teachers are different and dangerous to children. The textual practices reinforce the "common-sense" view of women as the nurturing mother and that men wishing to work in these contexts are effeminate, homosexual, or pedophiles (Blount, 2005; Fifield & Swain, 2002; Weems, 1999). This position drives both homosexual and heterosexual men from wanting to work with young children, further reducing the presence of men in ECED (Farquhar et al., 2006).

Researchers have argued that cases of child sexual abuse by ECED teachers and caregivers were quite rare (less than 1%) and that most sexual abuse was carried out in the home (Elliott, Browne, & Kilcoyne, 1995; Shakeshaft & Cohan, 1995; Tobin, 1997). Despite this fact, many administrators and schools have instituted "no-touch" policies, which "unfairly deny children the touch they need for physical and emotional survival" (Carlson, 2003, p. 8). It is apparent that textbook authors do not condone the proliferation of "no-touch" policies in ECED classrooms—36% of all images (depicting teachers and children together) demonstrate some form of physical contact. However, standards for appropriate touch seem to differ based upon the gender of the teacher. These views are steeped in cultural attitudes and beliefs concerning the role of men and women in society. It is our contention that the gender of the teacher or the child should have no relevance with regard to appropriate touch between a teacher and child. Rather, touch between a teacher and child should be evaluated based on the child's age-appropriate needs (Neill, 1991). It is essential to reiterate that we are not arguing that men are being unfairly persecuted in the ECED context; rather, we wish to suggest that children would benefit from engaging with men who interrupt stereotypical, normative notions of gender (Cunningham, 1999; Sumsion, 2005). As it now stands, ECED preservice teaching texts offer future teachers a traditional patriarchal view of men that does not encourage nurturing and comforting children.

A further implication of this study points to the importance of the author's gender on the types of images within the text. For instance, the most nurturing images of men were included in texts authored by men (Gartrell, 2007; Morrison, 2006). The four examples of male teachers in the category of mutually negotiated contact (MNC) came from these texts. The implication is that without these two texts, there would have been no examples of men in this category and only one example within the teacher touching child (TTC) category. It is our hope that publishers, authors, faculty, and students begin to take notice of these representations (or lack of these representations) and critically evaluate the texts we currently use and also work to create more balanced depictions in future texts.

Lastly, this research endeavor was an attempt to deconstruct the roles of men and women in ECED contexts. The results suggest that gendered messages are at play in ECED textbooks. However, further research is needed to explore a greater number of texts and provide a more robust statistical analysis to that larger body of data. Furthermore, more fine-grained analysis should be undertaken to clarify interactions between genders (both teacher and children) within the text images. This approach would provide needed insight into how gender affects the nature of interaction between teachers and children. Another approach could include investigating ECED preservice teacher reactions and critiques of text images to provide important insights into how future teachers perceive the messages embedded within their textbooks.

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