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Reich-Shapiro, Mindi & Aviles, Chris Martin (2024). **Eliciting Children's Perspectives of Their Male and Female Teachers: Constructing Gender in a New York City Early Childhood Classroom.** Paper presented on the 32nd Annual EECERA Conference, Brighton/United Kingdom, 5.9.2024.

This study explores how young children view their male and female teachers within the sociocultural context of a New York City ECEC setting. Much research has explored men's motivations to teach young children and their contributions to the early childhood profession (e.g., Brownhill & Oates, 2016; Reich-Shapiro, Cole & Plaisir, 2020; Warin, 2018). However, little academic attention has been paid to the perspectives of young children in early childhood research (Wall & Robinson, 2022). Young children actively co-construct gender identities and experiment with gender roles as they engage with the routines and practices of early childhood classrooms shaped by the pedagogy and perspectives of their teachers (Thorne, 1995; Danby, 2003; Lowe, 2003). In this qualitative study, twelve children (ages 3-5) from two classrooms with male-female teaching teams participated in drawing/telling, interviews, and role play to explore their perceptions of their teachers' roles. Teacher and administrator interviews and parent surveys provided sociocultural context. Thematic analysis identified patterns across the data and relationships between children's and teachers' perspectives. A consent/assent form and information sheet was provided to all participants. Children who provided assent chose the activities they wanted to engage in and how long they wanted to engage. Findings suggest multiple influences in the ways children come to understand gender based roles, and co-construct and redefine these roles within the ECEC setting. This study highlights the benefit of integrating children's perspectives to understand how the pedagogical practices and co-teaching dynamics of male and female educators can challenge binary perspectives of masculinity and femininity.

Keywords

male educators, gender roles, children's perspectives, ECEC workforce, gender equity

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Children's Perspectives of Their Male and Female Teachers


Constructing Gender in a New York City Early Childhood
Classroom

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EECERA Conference 2024



Introduction



This case study of a New York City community college-based early childhood center weaves together the voices of children and their teachers to gain insight into how young children perceive the role of, and their relationships with, their male and female teachers. A parent survey was also conducted to provide broader context.

We use the terms “female educator” and “male educator” to describe self-identified early childhood educators who participated in this study. We recognize this is a binary notion and that it does not adequately encompass the gender identities of all people.



Men in ECE: Challenging Stereotypes and Gendered Pedagogy

In a recent NYC study, male early childhood educators characterized their work with children and families as **transformative**, challenging gender stereotypes and definitions of masculinity and femininity.

At the same time, several male educators also described a **gendered approach to pedagogy** that was more open than their female colleagues to allowing children to take risks and actively participate in decision-making.

(Reich-Shapiro, Cole & Plaisir, 2020).



Early Childhood Classroom: A Community of Learners

Young children come to know themselves and the world through **collaboration** with teachers and peers in a multidimensional system of relationships (1).

The classroom experience is a **collaborative process of transformation** for all actors (2).

Girls and boys are **active players in the process of constructing gender** in classroom settings , though girls **cross traditional gender role boundaries** more often than boys (3,4).

(1. Rogoff, 2009; 2. Stetsenko, 2012; 3. Thorne, 1995; 4. Solomon, 2016)



Eliciting the Unique Voices and Perspectives of Children

Young children are competent social actors and rights holders (1).

The voices and perspectives of young children are often overlooked in research about ECEC (2,3).

This study aimed to learn how young children:

- Collaboratively construct gender in their daily routines and interactions with their male and female teachers
- Interpret concepts of care
- Express their expectations for participating in various activities

(1. UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, 2005; 2. Reich-Shapiro, 2018; 3. Wall & Robinson, 2022)



Contextualizing the Study



Impacts of COVID-19 in NYC: ECEC and Working Mothers

COVID-19 profoundly impacted NYC and intensified existing gender inequities in childcare (1):

- By May 2020, 91% of ECEC programs were closed or operating remotely(2)
- Twice as many women as men dropped out of the labor force (3)
- Impacts were significantly greater for low-income women of color (4)

At the time of our study, in the context of the population of the community college early childhood setting:

- Women had assumed a greater share of responsibility for childcare
- Children did not have the benefit of face-to-face socialization with peers or adults outside the family during prolonged school closures

(1. NYCEDC, 2021; 2. Tarrant & Nagasawa, 2020; 3. AAUW, 2022; 4. Racklin et al, 2022)



NYC Men Teach Initiative: Bringing Men of Color into EC Classrooms

- Implemented in 2015 to expand the gender, racial, and ethnic diversity of NYC educators (PreK-12)
- Designed to address challenges, biases, and institutional inequities
- Intersectional approach to expand the teacher pipeline
- As of 2022, NYC Men Teach had added 4,000 men of color to the NYC public schools
- NYC early childhood workforce had achieved 4% male educators, compared with national average of 2.6%.

(NYC Men Teach, 2023; US Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2023)



ECEC in a Community College Setting

- Children enrolled at the center reflect diverse CC student population:
 - 39% Hispanic/Latinx
 - 32% Black/African American
 - 15% Asian/Pacific Islander
 - 14% White
- 70% of students come from families earning less than \$30,00/year; many are below the poverty line (median NYC income: \$70,663/year)
- Strong and explicit focus on social justice, diversity, and equity; gender equity and support for non-traditional and non-binary gender roles are situated within a broad intersectional framework.
- Strong culture of community and collaboration, including home-school partnership



Methods

Study Setting

- Two classrooms with experienced male-female teaching teams:
 - **3K** (ages 3-4) male lead/female assistant
 - **Pre-K** (ages 4-5) female lead/male assistant
- Classroom layout, materials and daily routines:
 - Center whole child development and learning through play
 - Foster appreciation for diversity
 - Engage children in independent exploration in learning centers, as well as small group and teacher facilitated activities
 - Classroom library/displayed images represent diverse races, ethnicities, and genders
 - Learning centers include open-ended and gender-expansive play materials
- We observed children of both genders playing with dolls and cooking in the dramatic play center, and utilizing open-ended materials in the block, science, math and art centers.

Participant Demographics

Children	Twelve children (seven girls and five boys): <ul style="list-style-type: none">● 7 children from 3K (3-4 years)● 5 children from Pre-K (4-5 years)
Teachers	3K Classroom Male lead teacher; female assistant teacher 4K Classroom Female lead teacher; male assistant teacher
Executive Director	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● African American female● 33 years of experience in ECEC● Ed.D in Executive Leadership
Parents	Four parents: Three female and one male All parents have female children between the ages of 3-5 years

Meet the Teachers

Tanner (Lead Teacher, 3K)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Self-identified white male- BFA, Dance; MS, ECE- 11 years teaching experience
Payton (Assistant Teacher, 3K)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Self-identified Latinx/Caribbean female- AS, ECE- 23 years teaching experience
Gwen (Lead Teacher, 4K)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Self-identified Latinx/Caribbean female- BA, Child Development; MS, ECE- 23 years teaching experience- Pre-K Coordinator for NYCECE
Dawson (Assistant Teacher, 4K)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Self-identified African American male- AS, Music- Began working as a teacher's aide at NYCECEC- Currently completing Bachelor's Degree

Data Collection

Classroom Observations	Conducted over several visits to the center to provide sociocultural context of learning environment (physical and social environment)
Teacher Interviews Executive Director Interview	<ul style="list-style-type: none">-One-on-one onsite interviews (15-20 minute) with teachers across two visits-Shared career trajectory and reflections on how gender might influence their role/relationships in the classroom- In-depth interview with executive director- Provided overview of program vision, structure, and curriculum → regard to role of gender- Discussed value of male educators in the field
Parent Survey	Online survey → parents/family narrative and conceptualization of gender in society, in parenting, and in their child's classroom

Data Collection and Analysis

Child Data Collection	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Collected across three visits using three methods:<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Drawing/telling- Role Play- Informal semi-structured interviews- Data collection activities were designed to be developmentally appropriate and support children's autonomy regarding engagement and participation- Data collection occurred at moments that were not disruptive to daily routine- Conducted in small groups of two to three children
Analysis	Thematic analysis explored patterns and trends across the data collected and relationships between children's and teachers' perspectives



Findings



Non-Traditional Models of Masculinity and Femininity

Payton: “I’m not the cookie-cutter, soft-spoken type of thing...I’m rough around the edges.”

Dawson: “I’m a softy” who is as comfortable playing with dolls as race cars.

Payton is assertive and boisterous, engaging the children in active play and intentionally challenging gendered play stereotypes.

Tanner and Dawson are quiet and soft-spoken, often engaging the children in creative and artistic activities, as well as gender-expansive pretend play.

Gwen most often engages the children in math and science projects.

Choosing Teachers for an Activity

Children's thinking was fluid regarding which teacher they would choose for different activities:

- Boys and girls like to count, read, storytell, write, build blocks, create art, and engage in music, dance and pretend play with both male and female teachers from both classes.
- They often mentioned more than one teacher for each activity.

Children often made non-traditional gender choices:

- Payton (F): Racing cars and playing with trains
- Dawson: Playing with dolls and making dinner in the pretend center

Boys and girls chose Payton (F) most often for all activities based on their perception of her as particularly competent

Children chose Tanner (M) for creative arts activities and both Tanner and Dawson (M) for pretend play.

Explaining Their Choices

Competence: “I always ask Miss Payton, ‘Come build the biggest tower ever seen’ and Miss Payton’s going to say, ‘Yes, sure’ and we’re going to build a big one (to the) sky.”

Practical: “He (Dawson) helps kids and takes us outside on the bicycle.”

“She (Payton) helps me do the abc’s”

“She (Gwen) does more things with me.”

“He (Tanner) likes to read (Disney’s) *Frozen*.”

Attachment: “I love her (Payton) so much”

“I love everything with Dawson”

“She’s (Gwen) my favorite teacher.”

“He’s (Tanner) cool.”



Who Do You Go To For Help with Tasks or for Comfort?

“Whichever teacher is close, but I ask different teachers.”

Children chose teachers from both classrooms, and often named two or more teachers (male and female).

With one exception, we did not discern a gender-related pattern in children’s responses.

One (3K) child expressed a clear gender-related preference, saying “I don’t like Tanner because he’s a boy, so I don’t want him to help me.”



Social-Emotional Regulation: A Gendered Space in the Classroom

For help with social-emotional regulation (e.g., sharing, conflict resolution) all twelve children, boys and girls, chose Gwen (F) or Payton (F) or both:

“She (Payton) tries to go in the closet and find another one.”

“She (Payton) asks why Q won’t share and says, ‘Please share with A’ and she makes friends share.”

“She (Gwen) lets me use the instruments and sometimes she doesn’t.”

“When I ask them (Gwen and Payton) something they always come with me and let me play in the sandbox.”

Responses seem to reflect children’s trust in Payton and Gwen as competent in the art of conflict resolution.



Discussion and Conclusion



Weaving Together the Voices of Children and Their Teachers

Gender identities and roles are co-constructed in the relationships between children and teachers, and in spaces where they interact (Danby, 2003; Lowe, 2003).

A methodological approach that integrates the perspectives of the youngest stakeholders provides a richer understanding of classroom dynamics, and can help reconceptualize the value of male educators and build gender equity in ECEC settings.



What We Learned: Teachers

Male and female teachers at NYCECE:

- Valued non-traditional and non-binary gender roles.
- Intentionally and explicitly challenged gender stereotypes in their demeanor, their co-teaching dynamic, and their relationships and discourse with the children.
- Engaged children with love, nurture and care.

Pedagogical practices and co-teaching dynamics of male and female educators provided a model for ECEC that challenged binary perspectives of masculinity and femininity.

What We Learned: Children

Children at NYCECE:

- Articulated no gender-related preferences when seeking teachers for help with tasks or for comfort.
- Sought out male and female teachers for a variety of play activities not linked to traditional gender roles and stereotypes
 - Dolls and housekeeping with male teachers
 - Trains and block building with female teachers
- Chose teachers for play activities based on personality, interests, perceived competence, and physical accessibility
- Articulated a strong preference for female teachers when needing help with social-emotional regulation, indicating that this was still a gendered space in the classroom.



Final Thoughts

Perhaps the value of male educators in ECEC is found specifically in children's relationships with their teachers as individuals, rather than as male and female teachers, and in the opportunity to co-construct gender identities that integrate non-stereotypical models.