

# MEN IN YOUR TEACHER PREPARATION PROGRAM

## Five Strategies to Recruit and Retain Them

Bryan G. Nelson and Shamani-Jeffrey Shikwambi

Juan enrolled in his local university after serving in Afghanistan as a young Marine. As a veteran he qualified for a scholarship and began his studies as a business major. After a semester, Juan felt dissatisfied with his choice. Remembering how much he enjoyed coaching children in sports, Juan thought that perhaps teaching would be similarly rewarding. He decided to make the switch to education.

On the first day of classes at the school of education, he found himself in a sea of women, including his professors. He liked the program and learning more about children, but as one of only a few men in his classes, Juan felt isolated. Although the women were friendly, he often found himself feeling impatient with the way they discussed topics. Juan's family and friends were supportive; however, they questioned his career choice of working with young children.

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**Bryan G. Nelson** is founding director of MenTeach.org and co-facilitator of the NAEYC Men in Education Network (MEN) Interest Forum. He received a fellowship to attend Harvard University to research men, fathers, and children and is adjunct faculty at Metropolitan State University in Minneapolis–St. Paul, Minnesota. [bgnelson@menteach.org](mailto:bgnelson@menteach.org)

**Shamani-Jeffrey Shikwambi**, EdD, is an assistant professor of elementary education at Loras College in Dubuque, Iowa. His research focuses on issues of access, quality, and diversity in education and the recruitment and retention of men in early childhood education and care. [shamani.shikwambi@loras.edu](mailto:shamani.shikwambi@loras.edu)

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### Supporting men in education

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In this article, we explore ways to welcome and support men who attend teacher education programs or who teach in early childhood programs or elementary schools. Over the years, we have met, interviewed, and corresponded with hundreds of university faculty and male students about their experiences in teacher education programs. We have been in touch with male teachers in early education as well. Most have faced challenges similar to Juan's, and their instructors wonder about the most effective way to support the few men in their programs.

Some university education departments and early childhood education facilities unintentionally perpetuate cultural conditions that dissuade men from entering or remaining in their programs or the field. Many also unwittingly ignore the significant differences between men and women in higher education—for example, “females scoring higher on verbal ability tests and males scoring higher on spatial ability tests.” Another example of differences: “when females interact together, there is typically a focus on interpersonal connections, whereas for males interacting with males, the focus is on developing individual status” (Harrop, Tattersall, & Goody 2007, 386).

Adjusting to gender differences requires faculty and staff to respond to men while neither perpetuating stereotypes nor limiting how men interact with children, such as not allowing men to change infants' diapers (Nelson 2002). It also requires awareness of the overlap of gender with class, race, sexual orientation, and other identities. Although challenging, there have been successes. Women have thrived in traditionally male programs when modifications were made to the program culture. Women now make up more than half of students graduating

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from medical and law schools in the United States (Burke & Mattis 2007; Sax 2008). From our years of experience, we believe percentages of men graduating from early and elementary education universities and programs can increase with comparable culturally relevant modification for men in education.

## Modifying your program

Five strategies are key in welcoming men to a university education program. These modifications are sometimes referred to as *wraparound services*, because they require additional resources “wrapped around” the existing academic program (Burke & Mattis 2007; Sax 2008). Most schools or early education programs can readily adapt and implement these services.



### 1. Have men work with children immediately

Many men have little or no experience working and interacting with young children (birth to age 8), and their initial awkwardness may cause professors, supervisors, and families to judge them harshly (Sanders 2002; Sargent 2005). Although Juan had worked as a football coach with teenagers, he lacked experience with younger children. This placed him at a disadvantage before he even began his studies.

The situation is similar to that of some women who study mathematics or computer science. To remedy their discomfort in navigating a predominantly male culture, computer science and engineering schools set up special programs to support women in developing their competence and familiarity in these areas (Burke & Mattis 2007).

Nursing and education schools need comparable programs for men around nurturing and caring (Carlson & Nelson 2006). Supporting early, non-graded interactions with young children can build male students' confidence in their ability to interact appropriately with young children. Many men find the opportunity to play with children a significant reason for choosing a career in education (Nelson & Sheppard 1992; Sargent 2001). Playful exchanges with children in preservice education students' early stages help reinforce the joy of working in the early education profession. Schools could use these supervised experiences as a scaffold for developing further skills while acknowledging men's existing skills and interest.

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## Football Players in the Early Childhood Classroom: Learning Teaching Skills

The story I retell below is from Herman E. Walston, former director of the Kentucky State University child development center.

Every semester, Dr. Walston hired work-study students, usually women, to assist in the early education program. However, one spring, very few students were available, and Dr. Walston had to act quickly to recruit staff. He met with the university's football coach, a friend of his, and persuaded the coach to send six football players to work in the early childhood program during the spring semester, their off season.

On the first day of training, when the young men showed up for orientation, they seemed to fill the room. The men had little to no experience working with children. They were available for training only part of each day for one week, so Dr. Walston wanted to make the most of that time. He decided to use a new training approach, different from the one he had used for years with the women work-study students. He adapted it to fit the experience and understanding of the six men— similar to that of a coach teaching the complicated plays football players must memorize.

In the middle of the children's classroom, Dr. Walston set up a chalkboard and drew a diagram of the room. He labeled and explained the purpose of each of the activity areas and the students' roles as teacher assistants. To make the experience more familiar and to build on the students' experiences in athletics, Dr. Walston carried a clipboard with his notes and wore a whistle around his neck. He explained that each student would cover a zone of the classroom. He told them, "Part of your job is to guard or keep an eye on each child in your zone. When a child leaves your zone, you are responsible for letting one of the other players—your coworker—know that the child is entering his area."

Dr. Walston walked them through the activity areas and demonstrated specifically their roles. He blew the whistle to get their attention and to change activity centers. In the reading area, for example, he sat in front and held a children's book out, so each student could see the illustrations. He read the story to them, modulating his voice in dramatic ways to show them exactly what to do when reading aloud to young children. He had the players each select a book and read the story to himself. He realized that they might be embarrassed to read aloud in front of their teammates, but would be okay reading to the children.

Dr. Walston used the same approach in each activity area, until the students were comfortable and the activities familiar. He repeated the drills daily, adding new information and depth to their learning and setting forth clear expectations and answered questions as they arose. Dr. Walston provided a "playbook"—a diagram of each activity area and a summary of specific job duties in that activity. He trained them in first aid, CPR, and other health issues basic to early education.

When children arrived the following Monday, they were excited to see the six men in their classroom. Some were a little shy. Many wanted to know, "Whose daddy are you?" As the weeks went by, the students grew more confident in their ability to manage the various zones and interact with the children. The parents were thrilled to have men in the classroom, the young men enjoyed learning about children, and the director had the work-study students needed to serve as teaching assistants.

Dr. Walston felt that several factors contributed to the experiment's success. First, the football players had no preconceived ideas about working with young children, so they were open to new learning. Second, as athletes, they were "coachable." That is, they were used to following clearly explained instructions. Dr. Walston's approach took advantage of their learning style. And third, the men were ready to enjoy the new situation, and they had fun playing with the children.

In adapting his teaching style, Dr. Walston created a culture in which the students were comfortable, and the men adapted easily in this receptive environment. By the end of the semester, two of the five young men changed their university major to education.



## 2. Provide a mentor

Those ungraded interactions require early childhood professionals acting as mentors to observe and supervise the male students. Research shows that having a good mentor is an important element in a teacher's successful development—that “time spent working with a mentor does improve teaching skills” (Smith & Ingersoll 2004, 702). An effective mentoring relationship helps reduce dropout rates both at universities and in schools or child care centers (Smith & Ingersoll 2004; Johnson & the Project 2006). Together with their mentors, male students can develop methods to combat the silent yet powerful stereotypes of men working with young children portrayed by the media and held by society.

One of Juan's female professors became an important mentor. She encouraged Juan to offer fun, active, and developmentally appropriate games that would draw from his life experiences. From his time as a coach, Juan devised an activity using footballs. It involved computation skills while promoting the development of children's large motor skills. The children found it unique and enjoyable.

A mentor might help Juan recognize and use to advantage his natural gifts—for example, how he could use his six-foot-five stature, deep voice, and other strengths to positively engage the more energetic children while also being aware that these attributes might be a little scary to some of the shyer children. Further, a mentor could help Juan understand why a man in early education may be of concern to some parents and help him develop strategies to put parents and children at ease. These ideas may seem obvious or simple to professionals in the field, but they are not part of many men's experiences.

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## 3. Facilitate a men's support group

One major struggle for men in early education is isolation (Sargent 2001; Nelson 2002; Johnson 2010). If the men in a program meet together regularly, say, once a week, they can talk about issues relevant to their experiences. (If not enough men

are enrolled in your program to make up a group, you can recruit men from other university or community college programs or invite alumni.) The group offers a place to develop friendships with other men in the education field. Juan already has friends, but they don't necessarily understand the issues in working with young children.

Support meetings (sometimes advertised as “club meetings”) are most successful when they have a focus—a topic of discussion for each meeting—and are led by an experienced facilitator who has worked with men. Otherwise, the participants may stop attending (Nelson 2002). It's most effective for the participants to brainstorm topics to discuss at the meetings. This encourages greater participation and

empowers them to take ownership of the group. The facilitator needs to guide the focus in supporting and resolving issues or problems, so the gathering doesn't degenerate into a complaint session.

Over time, the meetings provide a safe and confidential place to discuss with other male students classroom problems, confusion about homework, miscommunications with families or other teachers, and misunderstandings about negative treatment they may view as differential. The men can ask questions without embarrassment.

Another topic a support group might address is developing a new communication style to help men effectively interact with female colleagues. Tannen (1990) studied the impact of socialization of men and women and describes stereotypical feminine and masculine communication patterns. She writes, “Pretending that women and men are the same hurts women, because the ways they are treated are based on the norms for men. It also

hurts men who, with good intentions, speak to women as they would to men, and are nonplussed when their words don't work as they expected, or even spark resentment and anger” (p. 16). The facilitator can share scenarios with men to help them adapt their communication styles and let them feel more comfortable participating in conversations about subjects like children's friendships and nurturing and caring for young children.



## 4. Offer men a scholarship or stipend

Juan could attend the university's teacher education program because of his veteran's scholarship; however, not every man can afford it. In addition to the cost of higher education, low wages for teachers are another reason men may not enter or remain in the education profession (Nelson 2002; Sargent 2005). According to Johnson, “Because of competing opportunities for men,

teaching is ultimately less financially attractive” (2010, 256). A program could consider offering or counseling male applicants about scholarships and other financial incentives in order to balance the disincentives of negative stereotypes and societal perceptions of the low status of males in early education.

This approach is similar to gender-based medical, engineering, and law scholarships for women. For example, the National Science Foundation offers awards specifically for women enrolling in university programs in which they are underrepresented. “The scholarship program is . . . designed to aid in recruitment and retention, particularly of women, an underrepresented group in the computer science field” (NSF 2009). This successful strategy in recruiting female students points strongly toward offering comparable scholarships or awards to men.



### 5. Adapt the program's culture to welcome men

An effective and responsive teacher preparation program will consider the cultural climate for men. Numerous studies exist about women in traditionally men's university programs, offering an opportunity to under-

stand comparable examples for men of what Hall and Sandler (1984) call a “chilly climate.”

Male students can also face an unwelcoming environment when they are the minority, which then puts them at a significant educational disadvantage. This can include textbooks with no positive images of men teaching or caring for young children; using disparaging comments about men's (for example, husbands') competence with children; and questioning a man's motives for working with young children. Other less obvious examples of an unwelcoming environment can be a professor's patronizing or impatient tone; using classroom examples that only refer to “she” when talking about teachers; singling out men to lift heavy equipment or furniture; and expecting a man to represent all men's opinions in classroom or program discussions.

Taken individually, instructor or peer behaviors like these may seem benign; but as a whole, they tend to increase men's feelings of isolation and decrease their sense of belonging.

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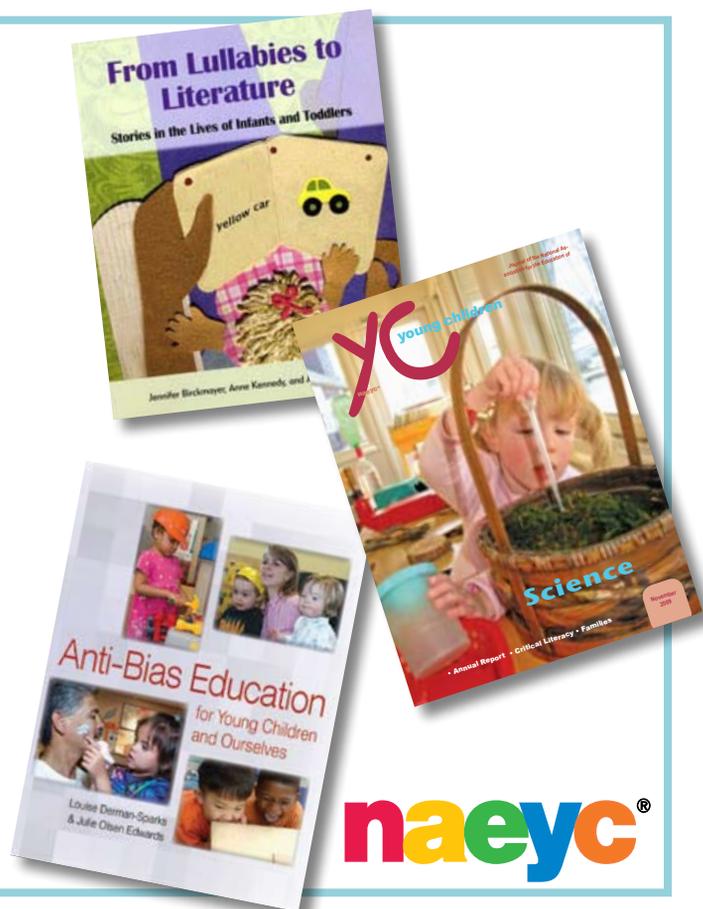
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## Inviting and welcoming both men and women

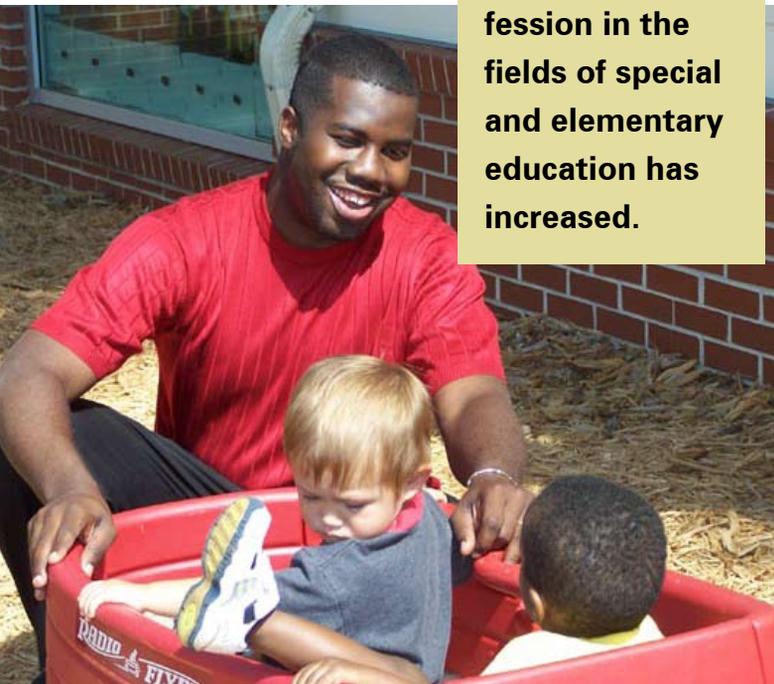
Over 15 percent of new teachers leave the profession after one year, and 50 percent leave after five years (Johnson & the Project 2006). University teacher education programs have a similarly high attrition rate for men (Petersen 2006).

There are, however, some positive trends in the education of male teachers. The percentage of male students entering the teaching profession in the fields of special and elementary education has increased (NEA 2008; Sax 2008; BLS 2009). At some universities there has been more than a 50 percent increase in men enrolling in elementary education (BBC News 2010).

Juan has a greater chance of success if he has more practice working directly with young children, a mentor he trusts, a supportive group of men with whom to share experiences, and financial incentives to offset the stigma of being a man in a female-dominated field. Finally, he has the best chance of succeeding if his university or early education environment acknowledges and values gender differences as positive contributions.

The goal is not to promote a kind of gender absolutism nor to imply that gender by itself qualifies a male for teaching. Rather, it is to strive to achieve a diverse, competent, and qualified workforce representative of the children and families served. Ultimately, the education and the care of children as a career should be inviting and welcoming for both women and men caregivers and teachers.

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There are several fatherhood, cultural, and diversity self-assessment checklists a university program or early education program or setting can adapt to heighten teachers' and administrators' awareness of gender diversity:

- The Father Friendly Check-Up. [www.fatherhood.org](http://www.fatherhood.org)
- Promoting Cultural Diversity and Cultural Competency. [www11.georgetown.edu/research/gucchd/nccc/documents/ChecklistBehavioralHealth.pdf](http://www11.georgetown.edu/research/gucchd/nccc/documents/ChecklistBehavioralHealth.pdf)
- Checklist: Responding to Student Diversity. [www.cmu.edu/teaching/trynew/checklist-studentdiversity.html](http://www.cmu.edu/teaching/trynew/checklist-studentdiversity.html)

These checklists, when appropriately modified, can provide concrete examples of values and practices supportive of men.

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