The author's parents, Charmaine and Captain Ronald E. Nelson, USAF, are pictured with their children, Teresa and Richard (back row) and Bruce, Karen, and Bryan (front row). In the inset are Bryan (center) with children Emma and Otto.

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Men Teaching and Working with Children: A History and a Future

Bryan G. Nelson

When I was growing up, my dad played with my brothers, sisters, and me whenever he could. Though his position in the military kept him away for months at a time, my dad stayed involved in our lives, and when he was home, he clearly loved being with us and nurturing us. From camping trips to cookouts to playing together with us at the local gym or just rolling around on the floor wrestling, my dad clearly enjoyed his children and wanted to be involved in their lives. He even attended Parent Teacher Association (PTA) meetings and got involved in our school as often as he could. His mother and father never fin-

ished high school, and so, understanding the value of education, he encouraged all of us in school and wanted us to attend college.

Because my dad so naturally assumed and deeply enjoyed, along with my mother, the role of nurturer and guide as his children's primary educator, I was surprised to discover when I eventually became a teacher that there were so very few other men (except for the janitor) working in schools. I wondered where all the men were. Was my father unusual among men because of his talent for and clear joy regarding nurturing children? I had grown up with a dad who loved being with kids, and *I* loved being with kids, so it seemed natural to me that other men would want to enter the teaching profession or work with children as well.

Where were all the men?

In this essay I briefly share a few of my experiences coming to work with children and the practical realities of men working with children that I have learned from research and professional experience.

Becoming a Teacher of Children

Before I became a teacher, I worked as a back deckhand on a ship, a radio disc jockey, a newspaper reporter, a short-order cook, and a construction laborer. Even though I knew my father had always really wanted to be a history teacher, a career in teaching had never crossed my mind—until one fateful summer. I took a job at a summer camp in the former Soviet Union, in Russia. I found I loved it. Working with children was challenging, rewarding, and just plain fun. After that summer was over, I ended up working in different capacities as a caregiver for two different families, a coach at a school in Paris, and an assistant in an after-school program for children. Eventually, I was inspired to look for a full-time job working with children and found one at a parent-owned childcare program, working with children ranging in age from infancy to five years.

Looking back on my earlier experiences, I understand that I knew how to play with children, but I wasn't sure how to teach. I knew how to have fun, but there were times the job called for more than just having fun. It required guidance. Guidance of young children was something that would take further time for me to understand, but I was willing to learn. A woman who worked in the childcare program offered me new ideas for activities I could do with the children. She had me sit at a table and help some of the older children with scissors. The boys usually had a harder time cutting, and having the role model of a man taking the time to cut out designs with them provided the extra inspiration they needed to want to try. She had me sit in the book corner and read to the children. I'd have a group of children sitting all around me absolutely riveted to the story I was reading them. The first time I read to a group of children, I had a memory of my childhood: the first time I saw the word "cat" being written. I could see the letters being carefully writ-

ten and then experienced a flash of understanding that those symbols, those three letters, had a meaning. I realized as I sat with the group of children that they could have that same flash of insight into the world of words, books, and language. It was thrilling. I had found work that fascinated me: teaching and working with children.

I began taking classes to get my teaching certificate and degree, and I soon found that the profession and the classes were filled with women. At this point I first began to question: *Where were all the men?* It felt strange being the only man in class, and it felt strange being one of only a few men working with children at my employer's childcare center. As I continued working with children while attending university, I also traveled to state and national conferences on early childhood and elementary education. At these professional gatherings, I would tower over the crowds of women (I'm 6'3"), and only occasionally would I see another man. In fact, the professional gatherings were so chock-full of women that often the men's bathrooms had been converted for women's use during the conference. I'd typically have to ask a janitor or someone at an information desk where the nearest available bathroom was for men. On several occasions the small group of men that were in attendance at these conferences would post a man at the door to the bathroom so the women wouldn't walk in while we were using it!

Over my years of experience in working with children and families, I realized how important this work with children is to their future and well-being. And I knew how important fathers are to children. I knew this by seeing children's positive and enthusiastic responses to men. It didn't make sense to me that so few men were teaching and working with children. In the remainder of this essay, I recount a brief history of men teachers, discuss why there are so few men teaching in early childhood programs or elementary schools today, debunk myths and stereotypes regarding men in the classroom and other professions working with young children, and share my vision for changing the status quo.

A Brief History: Was There a Time When Men Taught?

My experience at the summer camp has turned into more than 20 years of working with children and families, attending conferences, and completing college and graduate work in the areas of child development, education, and men teaching. As my experiences working in the field of early childhood and elementary education grew, I continued to wonder: *Where were all the men?* I finally decided to do some research to answer this question. I learned some interesting things.

If you had walked into school classrooms in early colonial America, you would find men—a lot of men.[1] Nearly all colonial-era teachers were men. According to public records, from 1635 to 1750, almost all of the teachers on town payrolls were men. Often young men, some studying to be clergy, were hired by local school boards to teach. It wasn't until 1750 that the number of men

teachers decreased to 85 percent, with the remaining 15 percent being women teaching primarily in summer programs.[2]

Over the next century, the male majority of teachers continued to decrease. During the 1800s, the proportion of men teachers in some states dropped to less than 25 percent. For example, by 1834 in Massachusetts, 54 percent of teachers were men, and by 1860 this figure dropped to 22 percent.[3] Obviously, there had been men teachers, and then the situation changed dramatically. What happened?

There are several explanations for the decline in the number of men teachers in the United States over the past two centuries. One of the primary reasons appears to be that men could earn higher wages in other occupations and women could replace the men teachers for lower wages, thereby making it cheaper for town school trustees. Demographic changes appear to be another reason why women began to enter teaching in greater numbers. In the mid-1800s, decreasing birthrates and an overall rise in the age men and women were getting married provided women a greater opportunity to attend school. With their newfound education, women wanted to work outside the home.[4] At that time, teaching was one of the few socially acceptable careers for middle- and upper-class women because teaching could be considered an extension of a woman's domestic role.

As Figure 1 shows, from the 1800s until the 1940s, the number of men teaching in school classrooms steadily declined.

Then, during a brief historical period from the 1940s until the 1980s, the percentage of men teachers again increased to a high of 34.3 percent in 1971. One of

Figure 1: Men Teachers in Public Schools: 1870–1999

Source: Statistical Abstracts, U.S. Department of Education, Bureau of Labor Statistics

the reasons for this temporary shift appears to be the unprecedented changes in society (e.g., wars and free postwar education) and in the roles of men and women during this time (e.g., women's movement). Since that 20th century peak, however, the percentage of men teaching has again steadily decreased to 25.1 percent in 1999. Currently, 18.9 percent of elementary and middle school teachers and less than 5 percent of early childhood educators are men.[5] If this trend continues, the percentage of men working with and teaching children will continue to

Successful Programs Supporting Men Teachers

These programs and websites offer programs, information, and support about recruiting and retaining men teachers:

- **MenTeach.** A national clearinghouse for research, education, resources, and advocacy with a commitment to increase the number of men teaching children in early, elementary, and secondary education: www.MenTeach.org
- **Call Me Mister.** A teacher training scholarship program with the goal of training 100 black men to be elementary school teachers: www.callmemister.clemson.edu/
- **Troops to Teachers.** A resource for men who served in the military to get support becoming teachers: www.proudtoserveagain.com/index.html
- **Teach for America.** A teacher training program for men (and women) who want to become teachers: http://www.teachforamerica.org/
- **Minority Recruitment Project.** A teacher training program in Kentucky for minority men: www.louisville.edu/edu/MTRP/mtrp.html

If you do an Internet search, you'll find additional programs being offered by universities and colleges. Also, these other websites offer information throughout the world about men teaching:

- **Canada.** A website about male teachers in Ontario, Canada: http://maleteachers.com/
- **Europe.** A website hosted from the United Kingdom: www.meninchildcare.com/
- **New Zealand.** A government-sponsored site in New Zealand: www.teachnz.govt.nz/training/providers/men.html
- **Australia.** A government-sponsored site from Queensland, Australia: http://education.qld.gov.au/workforce/diversity/equity/male-teachers.html

decrease unless action is taken to recruit more men teachers and retain the few currently working in the field.

Though my research provided me with a historical understanding of why so few male teachers worked with children, my curiosity was not yet satisfied. At the same time, I was eager to take some sort of action to draw more men into the field of education, so I did two things. First, I started an organization called MenTeach (www.menteach.org). I also applied for and received a fellowship to attend Harvard University to further explore through graduate research why men *in this day and age* were not only choosing not to enter careers working with children but also in fact abandoning their already established teaching careers.

The Harvard University Study: Why Are So Few Men Teaching Today?

Interestingly enough, but I guess not surprisingly, in 1997 when I applied to and was accepted at Harvard, I was admitted through the Maternal-Child Health department because there was no department devoted to *fathers, men, and children.* No *paternal*-child health department existed or any department remotely close that could house my research aims. So it was through the Department of Maternal-Child Health that I conducted a first-of-its-kind study of men teachers in the field of early childhood education. Using a random national sample survey of 1,000 early childhood educators (equal numbers of men and women), I researched the answer to these questions: *Are men important to children as teachers, and if so, why are so few men teaching?* With a statistically sound response rate of 507 participants (64 percent female and 36 percent male), the study provided a foundation for understanding more about men teaching and working with children.

The most interesting finding revealed in the study was that almost all (98 percent) of the early childhood educators surveyed strongly agreed or agreed that men were important to the growth and development of children in their roles as teachers. But less than 5 percent of early childhood teachers are men. Many survey respondents included written comments about the positive influence men have working with young children:

- "In the setting I am currently working in there are a couple of male college workstudy students—the children respond well to them—it has been wonderful—hopefully the numbers will increase."
- "Men need to be encouraged to be with children. . . . Men can be as nurturing as women. They can be an important factor in the growth and development of children. Men need to encourage men!!!"
- "I've only met one male kindergarten teacher in my life, and I've had one male student kindergarten teacher. Both were exceptional teachers."

- "This country as a whole does not value, support, or encourage men to work with young children. In spite of some progress in the home, the general population, especially males themselves, do not recognize the value of the contributions they can make and the profound influence they can have in the early childhood population."

Thus, the study supported my own experience validating the importance of men teaching and working with children.

The study not only showed a highly positive response regarding the value of men working with children but also revealed why so few men were teachers. The current and most common barriers to men teaching and working with children identified by survey respondents are as follows.

- **Stereotypes.** Some people believe that working with young children is "women's work," that men are not nurturing, and that there must be something wrong with any man who would want to teach young children.
- **Fear of accusation of abuse.** Some people fear that men will harm children or be accused of abuse.
- **Low status and low wages.** Working with young children has low status and low wages.

Later, through subsequent analysis, I looked more closely at these findings around barriers men face and barriers that employers face in recruiting, hiring, and retaining men teachers. Further research revealed that survey respondents had hit on three of the many stereotypes and myths about why so few men are working as teachers of young children. Such perceptions make it difficult for men to enter or remain in careers working with children. In order to make progress, efforts must be made to challenge stereotypes, acknowledge people's fears or concerns, and work for better compensation for both men and women who care for young children. Organizations such as MenTeach and others in the field of education now must work strategically to bring our culture and society, ironically, out of the 21st century "dark ages" into the "light" of colonial America, where men not only taught but were valued, trusted, and highly regarded as teachers of children.

Debunking the Myths and Stereotypes: What's the Truth?

As my children were growing up, I would visit their schools. Invariably, teachers and other school staff would stop me in the halls on my way to the classroom to visit or volunteer. Staff would ask who I was and what I was doing in the school. I felt immediately suspect. I could tell by the way they acted toward me that women, and often men principals, feared I would harm the children or that

there was something odd about a father wanting to visit his child at school or volunteer. There were times that school staff welcomed me, but that was typically after they got to know me. Though I hoped that my experience—getting stopped in the hall on my way to volunteer—was my own isolated experience, my Harvard and post-Harvard research into men teaching and fathers working with children in childcare or school settings suggested otherwise.

There are many myths about why so few men work with young children and many stereotypes about men who do. Some of the myths are addressed below, and perspectives based on more accurate information are offered instead.

Myth #1: Men and Harm to Children

- **Myth.** Men who work with young children may be prone to atypical feelings for or dangerous intent toward children and may sexually molest them.
- **Truth.** A child is just as safe in a childcare program or school classroom as he or she is at home with parents.

If abuse of a young child occurs, it is most likely to occur in the child's home.[6] In 90 percent of reported cases of child abuse in the United States, the perpetrators of abuse on young children were parents or other relatives.[7] There is no question that our children must be safe from harm, but being suspicious of all men or instituting "no-touch" policies for only men teachers does not protect children. Actions, rather than suspicions, are what protect children. Actions designed to avoid harm and minimize possible occurrences of abuse include carefully screening, recruiting, and supervising staff and volunteers; providing staff with training on child abuse; designing the environment to control access by visitors; reducing hidden places in which abuse may occur; and building close partnerships with parents.[8] These are the things that keep all children safe and allow all staff members to work in an environment without suspicion.

Myth #2: Men and Money

- **Myth.** Men won't work with young children because of the low wages.
- **Truth.** Men can be found working in many low-wage jobs, such as the fast food industry, general labor jobs, and temporary or seasonal work.[9] Men work in these low-wage jobs because men are accepted in these settings and a number of other men also work there.

Another way of understanding this myth is to look at the number of men teaching in the primary and secondary grades. In school districts where teachers have similar levels of experience and education and are represented by a union,

the salaries are the same. In these settings, only 16.2 percent of primary grade teachers are men compared to 42.5 percent of secondary grade teachers. If money were the only reason men don't work with young children, there would be more men teaching in the primary grades.

Myth #3: Men Don't Apply for Teaching Positions

- **Myth.** Men do not apply for jobs to teach or care for young children.
- **Truth.** Men apply for teaching positions but often are not hired.

A survey of early childhood education programs in Ohio found that center directors would not consider hiring a man without an early childhood degree, even though they had hired women without degrees.[10] And in a national study of National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) members, eight out of 10 administrators/directors indicated that men have applied, at some point, to teach in their programs. An owner of a childcare program from a Midwestern state commented, "Many women administrators will not hire men."[11] It is important to work toward creating incentives for men to apply for these positions and an atmosphere that encourages them to be hired and retained for positive performance.

Myth #4: Men Lack Interest in Teaching Children

- **Myth.** Men who teach children will leave the profession for something else.
- **Truth.** Men often want to stay in their jobs as teachers but face many pressures to move into administration.[12]

Many men see administration, such as an elementary school principal position, as something very different from teaching. It is often not something they are primarily interested in doing. However, men, like women, face pressures to move into another aspect of the profession because the wages in early education are often at or below the federal poverty level.[13] When men and women leave the profession, it is typically because they cannot earn a living wage.

Myth #5: Men and Sexual Orientation

- **Myth.** Men who teach young children are often gay.
- **Truth.** There is no information available about the sexual orientation of men who teach young children.

Men who teach young children are a diverse group, which includes men who are heterosexual, bisexual, and gay, just like the population of women who teach young children. These men are performing a job that in more recent decades has traditionally been considered more appropriate for women. If men do this, people often assume there must be something different about them. Women often face a similar myth when performing a job traditionally considered more appropriate for men. In an inclusive profession that serves a diverse population of children and families, sexual orientation has no place in determining the appropriateness of a person to be a teacher of young children.

Myth #6: Men and Capacity for Nurturing

- **Myth.** Men are not nurturing or patient enough to work with young children.
- **Truth.** Men have been caring for children as fathers, uncles, brothers, grandfathers, and teachers for generations.

The way men have cared for children has varied by culture and throughout history. However, no reliable research indicates men are any less capable of nurturing children than women are. Men may at times nurture children differently than women do. For example, fathers tend to engage in more physical play, allow a greater degree of independence, and engage in more open forms of verbal interaction than mothers.[14] Studies of men teachers show they are also patient, nurturing, and similar in their practices to women teachers.[15] Also, many kinds of work that require great amounts of patience have been traditionally done by men, such as being a counselor or a coach of a sports team.

Myth #7: Men and Capacity for Teaching

- **Myth.** Men who teach young children can't make it in other professions.
- **Truth.** Many men who enter early education often do so after they have had successful careers in other fields.

The myth that men who work in the field of teaching children cannot make it in other professions discredits the value of teaching as a profession and devalues the contributions of those who labor to teach and guide children. Men have become teachers of young children after careers in the military, insurance industry, banking industry, and law enforcement.[16] The men who work with children do so because they have chosen this career and typically have excellent abilities in the field of teaching children.

Myth #8: Men and the Needs of Children

- **Myth.** Men are not wanted or needed to work with young children.
- **Truth.** Most people want children to have loving men involved in their lives and recognize the value of such involvement.

According to the author's study, 98 percent of NAEYC members believe it is important for men to work with young children.[17] In another study, one respondent to a survey of licensed childcare providers in the state of Washington wrote this comment about men teachers: "The children are really thrilled to have the attention, nurturing, and care of men. And we happen to know that the benefit of male influence is wonderful and critical."[18] Most people believe it is important for children to experience having men as teachers and caregivers. This is unlikely to happen until the myths and stereotypes about men teachers are challenged. Only when men are encouraged, supported, and accepted as teachers and caregivers of young children will they enter and remain in the field of education and care of young children.

Toward a Brighter Future: What to Tackle First?

My father was a very important influence in my life. His nurturing and love for playing with his children, his participation in my education and school, and his involvement in my life affected me deeply. He made a huge difference in who I am today, the father I'm proud of being, my intrinsic love for working with children in the classroom, and my work with fathers (and mothers) as the primary educators of their children. The stereotypes that keep fathers and men out of the classroom need to be challenged—but what to tackle first?

Our fears about men hurting children, being uncaring or incapable of nurturing, or having interest only in money or status must be acknowledged, and the stereotypes should not be perpetuated. This mindset alone, among men, women, and institutions, is discouraging positive, caring men from spending time with children and entering the teaching profession. With few positive models of men in our schools, children learn about men either at home or through the media. Movies repeatedly depict men as using physical force to resolve problems or too incompetent to care for young children, and newspapers often run headlines about men arrested for violence. Tragically, media portrayals of men spring from some ugly realities. Children need loving men in their lives to balance the distorted and negative image of men in the media. The solution to protecting our children from harm isn't fewer men but stronger, caring, nurturing men in their daily lives.

Next, it is important to fight for paying our teachers—both men and women—well for the important work they do. Institutions demonstrate through

the wages they offer the underlying values and shared beliefs of society as a whole. That our society values, through pay, our professional athletes, business consultants, and even waste management employees (garbage men) more than we do our children's teachers is unacceptable. I am not devaluing these services to society but simply putting our values into perspective. In the past year especially, economists have stepped up to the plate in an effort to draw attention to the value of early childhood education, showing that for every $1 spent there is a $16 return on investment.[20] If we pay teachers more and respect the important work they do, additional highly qualified, smart, trained, nurturing individuals with a talent for working with children—men included—will become teachers.

As a father and a teacher, I encourage men to consider teaching in early childhood programs or schools. I also encourage those in hiring positions to recruit men to teach and care for children. An individual might start as I did, by working at a summer camp or coaching a sports team, or a father could volunteer in his child's classroom to read a story, play with blocks, or help children learn to write their name. Children need strong, caring men in their daily lives. What better time to offer that care than when children are young and eager to learn and play? What better place than the learning environments children experience as they grow and develop?

When I get discouraged or wish to remember what needs to happen to change the status quo and bring men into the challenging, rewarding profession of teaching young children, I imagine walking into a school classroom in the future. The building is modern and clean with the latest equipment and supplies that are readily available. The air is filled with the laughs and comments of young children. In every room you enter, there are equal numbers of men and women, teaching, reading, or playing with the children. And those teachers, educated and well paid, are as diverse in characteristics as the children in each classroom. I know that with time, resources, and persistence, this vision for the education of young children and the involvement of men in children's daily lives can come true.

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