

Do Males Truly Struggle More Than Females During Student Teaching?

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Abstract

Over the past ten years, we have noticed a baffling contradiction in our multiple-subject teacher credentialing programs. Although they are predominantly populated by female teacher candidates, it seemed that the majority requiring additional support and remediation, including those who did not complete the program, were male—at almost a ten-to-one ratio. Was this really the case? As a result, we examined the data of student teachers over the five year period from 2007 through 2011.

Background

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Our college, California State University, Northridge (CSUN), has two basic documents to record when a teacher candidates experience some difficulty and require extra support. The first is the Student Teacher Assistance Report or STAR,¹ which is designed to note extra assistance provided by the University Supervisor or Supervising Teacher. This notification has two main purposes. First, it provides evidence of the extra support that is both required and maintained in the candidate's file. It also serves to outline specific challenging focus areas that require improvement and the explicit extra support offered to enable the candidate to become successful. Oftentimes the STAR report is enough to jump-start the candidate into realizing the importance of the teaching profession, accepting the constructive assistance and successfully complete the program.

¹ This form can be viewed in Word format at http://www.csun.edu/education/eed/assets/docs/student-teaching/STAR_-_Student_Teaching_Assistance_Report.doc

The second document and next level of support is the Student Teaching Assistance Plan or STAP,² which is implemented when a candidate is not successful and is either pulled from the school site or withdraws. The STAP may become necessary for a variety of reasons but must be completed prior to receiving permission to resume student teaching. The remediation is purposely connected to the thirteen California Teaching Performance Expectations (TPE's) as outlined under the six teaching domains. The STAP report specifically addresses instructional and/or dispositional areas that require special attention. Typically, the University Supervisor, Field Experience Coordinator, and the candidate meet to discuss the challenging focus areas and establish a contract that once successfully completed will be the ticket for the candidate to return to student teaching.

Students are offered two opportunities to be successful; if they are unable to meet the rigorous demands of a beginning teacher during these two placements then they are not allowed to continue in the program. Of course these policies are well documented in the Student Teaching Handbook and reviewed for a thorough understanding during any remediation process. Coordinators and candidates sign the STAP to ensure and document full disclosure and comprehension.

The Study

We examined 1135 student teachers over the past 5 years. Of those, 1007 or 88.7% were female, leaving only 128 or 11.3% male enrollment. (See Figure 1 for a graphical representation of female and male enrollment numbers.) This disparity is slightly greater than indicated by a 2006 survey conducted by the National Education Association, which reported a 17% male teacher population at the elementary level (p. 111). Unfortunately, this is despite their reporting a previous 9% increase in male teachers nationally from 2001 to 2006 (ibid.).

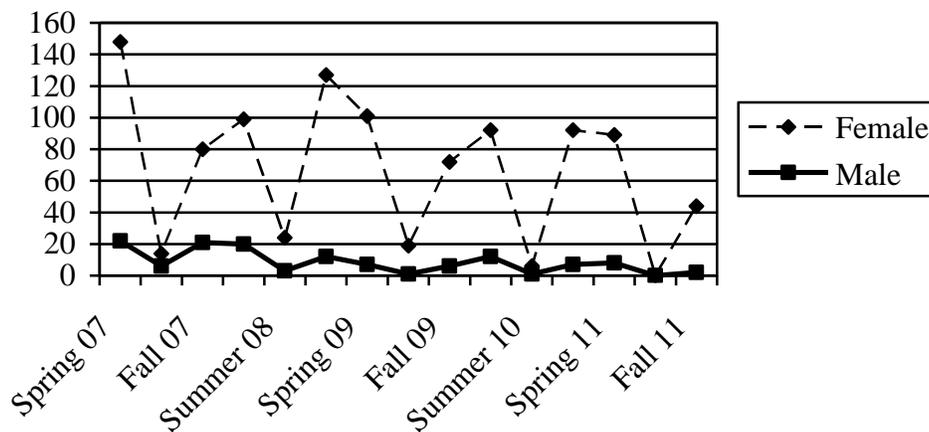


Figure 1. Female vs. Male Enrollment at CSUN. This demonstrates the large number of female primary preservice students who enrolled versus the relatively small number of new male students.

With only thirty-six student teachers receiving STAR reports in the past five years at CSUN, one would expect a distribution of gender percentages comparative to that of the general student population. However, only 44.4% of reports were on female candidates while 55.6% were on male instructors. There were also twenty-six STAPs reported with a similarly surprising spread—42.3% were on female instructors while 57.7% were completed on male students. In the same time period, seven candidate instructors failed student teaching. Yet, the data continued to surprise: 28.6% of those were female instructors while 71.4% were male instructors. The evidence clearly suggests that there is a disproportionate percentage of males (58%) having difficulties with student teaching compared to the percentage of males (11%) that make up the student body of student teachers. Figure 2 is a graphical representation of this data.

² This form can be viewed in Word format at http://www.csun.edu/education/eed/assets/docs/student-teaching/STAP_-_Student_Teaching_Assistance_Plan.doc

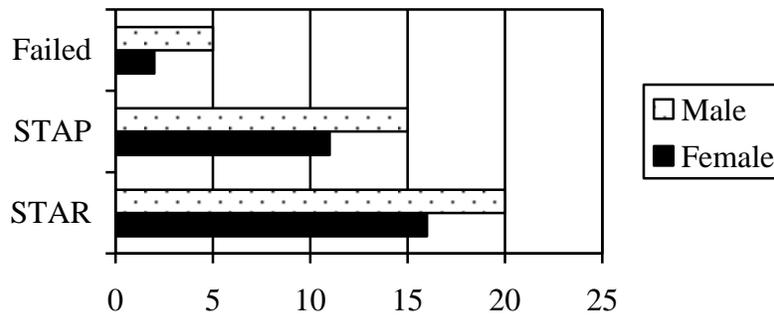


Figure 2. Male vs. Female Student Difficulties. This demonstrates the un-proportionate number of male pre-service students at CSUN who had difficulties in the program.

Upon examining the data we could not help but observe that the professional expertise of female candidates seemed to follow a pattern emblematic of a bell distribution curve. For example, some were highly successful and some were not, while the vast majority appeared in the middle. However, male students seemed to be polarized—they were either very successful or they consistently struggled. A more careful scrutiny of the data would be helpful in the future to discover if this hypothesis is consistent and might reveal the underlying rationale for it.

For instance, we should see if these numbers hold true at other elementary credentialing programs nationally. We should also consider whether single-subject programs, etc., in middle and high school also have a disproportionate percentage of male failure. These investigations could reveal if there is something endemic to our schools, or, at least, in the lower grade levels.

One possible area of examination in that regard might be alleged bias in the classroom. Cooney and Bittner (2001), concerned with the issues men face in early childhood education, have concerns with current pre-service training.

Some of the men acknowledged that their college classrooms often felt biased against the male student in choice of texts, in dominant perspectives expressed in discussions, in chosen content. One male even pointed out that it's not just the teacher editions of school books that are biased but that the teaching objectives are also biased, in their wording when referring to the teacher. Others stated that they hadn't thought about it until now and their awareness was raised by the discussion. They speculated that some great male students are lost to the early childhood education field because of college classroom bias. (p. 80)

This may come from, as Bradley (2000) notes, "institutional mythology" (p. 158). He catalogues a brief history of statements that that defines opinions about men serving in primary education that "still linger to this day" (p. 160). Whatever the case, classroom bias may be one reason men are disproportionately unsuccessful during pre-service training. Perhaps these biases overlap into the STAR and STAP reports and reporters. Further investigation in this area is warranted.

We should also research to learn whether the male candidate may want for a comparable support structure that is readily available to female students. Fewer male candidates afford less opportunity for same-sex peer support within their cohort and beyond. Those male students there may also illicit suspicion among their female colleagues because of institutional stereotypes. Furthermore, because of the bias against teachers, they may also lack support among their families and friends. Bradley notes,

As an aside, it is interesting to note that several of the male students privately ... informed me that they were having "second thoughts" about their elementary grades career choice. One student, in particular, emotionally described how his father and his uncles had held a "family gathering" collectively and forcefully informing him that they did not consider elementary teaching to be an appropriate vocation - for a male. (pp. 164–65)

There does seem to be a wide-ranged misconception within modern Western culture that primary education is “women’s work.” Smith (2004), in noting a similar situation within the Australian educational system, notes, “In particular, the literature and interviews suggest that it is particularly challenging for men to construct the identity of being a ‘real man’ whilst doing women’s work” (p. 4). He continues, “The current calls for male primary teachers to act as masculine role models for boys amidst the culture of nurturance within primary schools may place confusing and contradictory demands on their identity formation” (p. 5).

This stigma may place the male teacher in a less-than-comfortable position. Coulter (1993) notes that during the hiring process, some men “sensed an unspoken suspicion about sexual orientation. ‘Why do you want to teach elementary school?’ interviewers asked, but in tones that suggested the real question was, ‘Is there something wrong with you?’” (p. 403).

If this is the case, then it would follow that this discomfort would be especially true during the evaluation process. Assumptions about masculinity and sexuality already abounding, male teachers may simply feel unsure of how to show appropriate compassion without appearing to cross any boundaries. Cooney and Bittner note a student teacher who “shared that he felt uncomfortable when children spontaneously planted themselves in his lap. His discomfort was not with the child’s action but with what adults passing by the classroom might think” (p. 81). They go on to note a male teacher who feels like he is “fighting the line all the time” (ibid.). Smith writes, “There is ample evidence that male primary teachers find these perceptions extremely distressing and that they spend a great deal of time and energy protecting themselves from accusations” (p. 5).

This paper is meant to document data representative of one institution over a five-year period, not to answer these questions. Perhaps there is a simpler explanation: this report could be an example of the observation effect—male candidates have a physiological response to having their teaching monitored than women. Whatever the case, the data indicates a problem with a disproportionately high percentage of males enrolled in the pre-service programs at CSUN. Our hope, then, is to now question why, and to hopefully identify what steps we should take from here.

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