

# Where Are the Boys?

An interview with Javier Casio and Nick Terrones  
by Margie Carter



PHOTOGRAPH BY BONNIE NEUGEBAUER

*Women are always saying,  
"We can do anything that men can do."  
But men should be saying,  
"We can do anything that women can do."  
— Gloria Steinem*



Margie Carter, Javier Casio, and Nick Terrones work in Seattle and share a strong commitment to challenging gender and racial bias. They draw daily inspiration from

children who are eager to talk about differences and fairness and don't hesitate to play and frolic. Margie's newest book with her Harvest Resources Associates is *Reflecting in Communities of Practice*, available at [www.ecetrainers.com](http://www.ecetrainers.com).



This past year as our study tour group was preparing to leave Browns Bay, one of the lovely early childhood centres we visit in Aotearoa New Zealand, a little guy swept across our path dressed in a mask and cape. He stopped, taking in the composition of our group of 32 ECE educators, and with a puzzled, but powerful voice called out, "Where are the boys?" A few of us fumbled out a response. We told him we were glad he noticed there was a problem and we'd have to get back to him on that!

In the succeeding months Browns Bay owner and director Therese Visser and I had several exchanges about this question from Campbell and her attempts to explore with the children questions about superheroes, teachers, and the gender roles within these two concepts. But time constraints prevented her from unpacking their ideas as she'd hoped. For my part I played a bit of catch-up on the Internet, exploring research papers, blogs, and organizations such as the

World Forum Working Group on Men in Early Care and Education, which promotes the importance of gender balance in the ECE workforce. I found something from MenTeach, started in 1979 in Minnesota by Bryan Nelson, who seemed to forecast young Campbell's question as he wondered, "If teaching is so important, then where are all the men?"

Child care continues to be what Susan Murray calls "a gendered occupation," and her research explores the different ways men and women talk about why they enter the child care field and why they stay or don't. Murray works with a feminist analysis, as do I, which explains why I started this article with a favorite quote from Gloria Steinem. Today I'm most interested in hearing from men who in 2013 are choosing ECE teaching as a career. Maybe they can help us answer Campbell's question when we return to New Zealand next year.

## A Conversation with Javier Casio and Nick Terrones

I've known Javier and Nick over the last few years watching their wonderful work with children in very different settings in Seattle. After getting his ECE degree, Nick began working with pre-school-age children in a center serving

fairly affluent, mostly white families. After a few years, he moved down the hall to be a toddler teacher where he seems to be thriving along with the children, families, and his co-workers. Nick is both playful and serious in his work, bringing an engaged heart and mind to each day on the job.

Javier works on the other side of town, having finished his master's degree as he worked with four- and five-year-old children in a bilingual program serving low-income families, many of whom are new immigrants. His relationships with children and families are equally playful and serious and, like Nick, he enjoys probing for deeper meaning in his work. His thesis actually explored the topic of men in ECE as he is the only man working in his center. Nick, on the other hand, is one of 11 men working in his center out of a staff of 40. While they have met in the past, this conversation allowed us all to get to know each other better.

**MC:** I'm wondering how much you think about the idea of men in ECE and 'research it' as part of growing yourself as a professional. Some men really want to connect with other men in ECE, especially if they don't work with any. Others don't really care about that; they just want to do their job, enjoy it, and continue learning, but don't really focus on the 'being a man' part. Others are really proud of the role model they offer to the kids, to dads, and to other men who might consider teaching as a career. Browsing on the Internet, I've discovered some interesting groups and ideas about men in ECE. Is this something you've been interested in reading about, or are you absorbed with just doing the work with children and families and not focused on gender research or professional groups?

**NT:** I have just recently taken the time to see what's out there, regarding men in ECE. I have come across several blogs

and forums that provide a space for men in ECE to share ideas, tell stories, and seek advice. It's interesting and funny to me to think about: as a society our practices and tendencies are male-dominated, yet men in a female-dominated arena are seeking out solidarity and cohesion, and are oftentimes the minority. I think this goes to show how much this is a human need; to have support from sameness.

**JC:** For my master's thesis work I read extensively about men in ECE, which included theories of gender and equity in the profession, and the perspectives of many males interviewed in the literature. I found many of their experiences different from my own. I deepened my understanding of how children can benefit from the interactions men have in the ECE field.

**MC:** I'd love to hear more about your journey into ECE, what brought you here, why you have decided to stay. In many ways, you are a rare breed and have broken some cultural norms.

**JC:** My story is quite unique or perhaps less common among men coming into the ECE field. My mom works in ECE and told me about an opening she knew of as a floater or sub. She brought this to my attention because I had worked in a non-profit with middle-school students for the last couple of years. I, however, was ready to have a job with better income and insurance, for that was my mom's worry. I started in February 2008 and, like every other rookie, I did not know what I was doing because I did not have prior knowledge to even begin working with young children. I gradually started taking courses. While working with the children, I knew I was hooked when all the children always wanted to hold my hand or just simply play with them. To me this was not a job; I felt I was getting paid for playing all day. There were times I did want to quit because the children only listened to the

lead teacher and I had to outsmart the kids in order to have them think we were on the same level. This can happen in the first year.

**NT:** I can totally relate, Javier. I came into this field with basically no experience. The only real child care that I provided was for my younger brother; we were both latchkey kids. For my first week at work I was definitely a deer caught in the headlights, trying to keep up with the children's inquiries and interests. But ever since I was a child, I have always had an appreciation for the teacher-student dynamic. I was fond of school and had mostly positive experiences as a student. So the idea of being a teacher was sort of a no-brainer for me. Once I entered college, I immediately chose to major in elementary education. One of my prerequisite classes was a Human Development class that shined a little light on ECE. I was intrigued by the fact that there are people taking preschool seriously; I had always thought preschool was just a place to corral children until parents could pick them up. By the end of my freshman year, I was double majoring in Elementary Education and Human Development with an emphasis on ECE. The more I learned, the more fascinated and passionate I was becoming about this field. Once school was finished, I had to put all my book knowledge into practice, and so began my hunt for centers that were hiring. I've been at the same center for seven years now and feel blessed and inspired each day.

**JC:** I began my own journey in Human Development in early childhood education in such a way that I could only envision myself in an inclusive setting in a multi-lingual preschool. I have over five years of experience now in the early childhood field. I have replaced the career of being a social worker with educating small children. I have come to understand that the first three years are the most essential in order for children

to become successful. Working with a wide range of linguistically and culturally diverse individuals has given me great pride in shaping their minds in understanding anti-bias practices in the classroom. In my first job I had many children who spoke Spanish, but were not being taught in Spanish. I needed a way to help children maintain their native language, while gaining a second language. How could I do this if some of the children did not speak English or Spanish? This is what inspired me to deepen my understanding.

### Growing As a Professional

**MC:** Are there changes in how you think about your work now, compared with when you started?

**JC:** I think my whole approach has changed. I do not think I was assertive enough when I first started. I always wanted to do things my way and not give the children an opportunity. Now I really try to focus on their interests and go from there. I am a good group manager now; before I was just trying to survive. I have my master's now, and when I started I only had a high-school diploma. But I wonder if a degree is not as important as being charismatic and energetic. I know many teachers who do not have higher education and have very good interactions with children. Granted they are all women, but that is beside the point.

**NT:** After seven years, I feel more passionately about it. Outside of work when I tell people what I do for a living, often I hear "Awww, that's so cute!" or "That's nice you get to play with kids all day" or "Really? There aren't many boy preschool teachers, are there?" To be honest, I get a little defensive. I feel over time I have embodied a championing spirit for this field; to advocate for the importance of our work; that it's not a cute thing or a time, but a place for intentionality. My teaching practices

themselves have become more refined, and I feel I have really come into my own as a teacher. My education combined with my pedagogical experiences have also given me the opportunity to help other teachers in- and outside of my center.

### How Others View You

**MC:** Is being a male something that your staff, the kids, or their families ever talk about with you or as a group?

**JC:** To tell you the truth, that is not something I talk about with my families or my children. I mean sometimes it comes up, but I do not consider me being a male a factor in my work. I always want to put the best product in the classroom. My mentality is "Can or can I not do it?" It's pretty cut-and-dried. If I can't do something, then I find a way to do it. For example, can I tend to a crying child as well as my counterpart? Of course I can; I have built that relationship. I have a responsibility to make myself a loving human being, so yes I can do it. Can I replace a mother or father? No, but I can love children somewhat the same.

**NT:** Most of the time when a family talks about the males in our center, to me or other staff members, it is always positive: they emphasize how great it is and how good it is for the children to see men in these roles. Since I've been here, I'd say the male teacher population has tripled, so I think parents and children now see it as a norm. Interestingly enough, I feel I haven't seen children show any signs of viewing me differently than my female colleagues. The only instance I can think of is when a child calls me 'Papa' or 'Daddy.' I think this is because they're in a totally comfortable place that they see the adults caring for them on the same level as their legal guardians. For the first two years of life they (generally) associate their safety and well-being with

their parents; so, if they accidentally call me Dad, it's an absolute honor. As a staff, it's rarely a topic of discussion, until a visitor comments, "Wow, your center has so many male teachers. That's so great." To which the general response is "Yup. It sure is."

**MC:** In my early days of feminist thinking and the 'nature versus nurture' debates, I really wanted to believe that gender differences were mostly socially constructed and that we just needed to provide the same things for boys and girls to avoid gender roles and stereotyping. While I still think we need to avoid stereotyping and limited gender roles, I'm wiser now about some of the inherent gender differences that brain research has substantiated. This is important to consider, both in our work with children and in staffing our programs to have more gender balance. Here's how Michael Kauper, a longtime family child care provider, describes this:

"Children deserve men in their lives. Certainly men are not better caregivers than women. We are, however, in my opinion, different. Whether that difference is inborn or inbred (or both), the different approach of men to children and child care seems both real and valuable. I will go far out on a limb and suggest some possible differences. Men working with kids seem to take more risks, be more intrusive, more stimulating, more playful; we tend to be a bit less detail oriented, less patient, less calming. I observe that men often challenge children to enter the adult world; women seem to nurture children within the child's world. Make up your own list of differences. I say *vive le difference!*"

### How Do Each of You Think About This?

**JC:** In my case, I am super patient, more than most of the women I work with. I am very nurturing with the children.



I think I have stepped out of my cultural norms in every way, shape, and form imaginable. I am still seen as a weirdo to many of my friends and family. But I do agree that I take more risks, am more stimulating, and definitely more playful.

**NT:** Javier, you and I are in the same boat of weirdness! Many people who I tell that I'm an early childhood educator look to me for a punch line, as if I'm joking. I do see the differences between me and my female colleagues: I tend to be more boisterous, physical (rough and tumble play), playfully sarcastic, and definitely a little more challenging to children. While I believe how we perceive most things in our society has been socially constructed, there are innate elements that differentiate women from men. While these differences may influence how we approach interactions with children, I think it's safe to assume that both genders would have the same overall goal in mind: to raise a well-rounded individual. We have a choice and responsibility to challenge and explore those perceptions so that children can experience many perspectives and make their own informed decisions.

**MC:** I agree. But, you know, I've heard some men say that though their staff wants men to work in their center, they don't really want them to be men, but act more like the women do. What's up with that?

**NT:** What does that mean? To act like a man or woman? I am constantly amazed how much humans need to categorize and classify things and actions. Men are nurturing. Men are affectionate. And men are loving. Are these verbs only for women? No! These are human things.

**MC:** I took it to mean they were uncomfortable with the type of

things you described about yourself: more boisterous, physical, more challenging to children, and so forth. I think many females are uncomfortable with this kind of energy because it can lead to kid behaviors they don't trust or feel comfortable with. But your point that we do a disservice to perpetuate gender stereotypes is so valid.

**NT:** Ahh, I see now what you mean. Unfortunately, I would have to agree with you. Yet I have also had the pleasure to work with women who are as boisterous and physical as I am. I have also worked with teachers (both male and female) who were uncomfortable because of the reasons you mentioned. I have found that these are the teachers who are unprepared to set limits, to be silly and serious when the time is appropriate, or just let their emotions run too high; that their needs come before the children's. I think there's too much worrying that arises in these moments: "What if I can't stop these kids?" "What if they get hurt?" "Are they going to listen to me?" Too many what ifs and not enough why not's!

**JC:** I completely agree with Nick on this. What does this even mean: *acting like a woman*? I think in order to keep this

great work going, we need to pass on the torch of education. That may be easier said than done, for it's hard to repeat success or give up to others the success you have had in your work. For example, if my style of teaching gets across to about 85-90% of the children I work with, that same style of teaching used by another teacher (male or female) may have varied results. I would love nothing but success for those aspiring to be like me or those who base their teaching after mine, but I can't just give that up to them, for life experience really plays a part. What I'm saying is although I want to share my triumphs with others, it took me having challenges and trial and error. Someone would have to take what I did and modify it to fit his teaching style. Getting back to answering the question: I think everyone brings their "THING" to the team or workplace, and I hope for the sake of everyone that it's LOVE, regardless of being a man or woman.

### Making ECE a Career

**MC:** You each appear to be quite comfortable and fully a part of your centers. That isn't always the case for men who work in centers. What has made that possible for you? What advice do you

PHOTOGRAPH BY JEANNE HUNT



have for men who want to work with children and for center administrators who want to hire and keep men in their centers?

**JC:** One of the few things I can say is that this is not a 9-5 job! Working with a commitment really takes over your whole life. I mean this literally. I think that's why my kids have had a unique experience in my care. For instance, when I go shopping and I see something that would benefit my children, I will get it. You need to have the right amount of soft and the right amount of backbone for letting things go and not letting a bad day determine your week. I really have had to make this a habit and brush things off in order to move past them. Some advice I can offer administrators and teachers is to really get to know your teachers' thinking, male or female. I think a male can bring a vibe that can be contagious. I know for myself I try to keep things light and fun-filled. I like to think I've mastered mayhem and it only comes out when the mood needs it.

**NT:** When I first started out, I ignorantly fell into a trap of thinking 'Oh, I got hired because I'm a male.' This self-pitying or whatever you want to call it was thwarted by the fact that my colleagues took my work seriously and would challenge me when we discussed the children's work. This form of pedagogical thinking with my colleagues inspired me to think deeper and act on ideas inspired by the children. Because of this I felt that my contributions to our center were valued and it has kept me here, invested in our program. Over time, more and more males joined our center. Perhaps they found comfort in the familiarity or from the notion that they, too, could be valued as an educator. Being a male in this field is exciting. I feel like we're on the brink of something culturally radical: where men are asserting themselves in areas where it might not be considered masculine, yet

we're claiming ownership of the word and doing what makes us truly happy.

I would implore males who are interested in this field to first search themselves to identify the values they have for children. Let those values inform their teaching, and be willing to overlook the fact that you may be the only male. I think administrators don't really need to do more than they already do when hiring a potential employee, when it comes to hiring male teachers. Everyone wants to feel that their ideas and work are valued: that they will be valued as team players. While men in early childhood education are somewhat of a rarity, we're not a novelty. We have as much to give young children as anyone else.

## Conclusion

Listening to Javier and Nick I'm heartened by the lack of angst that many men working in the field describe in the research on men in ECE. My guess is that this speaks both to Javier's and Nick's individual personalities and integrity, and the supportive environments of their education and work settings. Javier passed along a pile of



PHOTOGRAPH BY BONNIE NEUGEBAUER

reading he did for his thesis, with research not only from the U.S., but Canada, New Zealand, and Australia. A good deal of it explored understanding the social construction of gender and how this impacts the experience of men attracted to work in ECE. At a practical level, I'm struck by how important it is to include this exploration as part of our teacher education work.

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Visit the *Exchange* website:  
[www.ChildCareExchange.com/issue](http://www.ChildCareExchange.com/issue)  
 to read Nancy Brown's story of how her ECE department and  
 lab school undertook this challenge.  
 I find this a heartening example, indeed.