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Crayons and Cleats

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As a receiver on the University of Dayton football team, Branden Johnson is skilled at opening his arms wide to gather up something dear.

The lanky junior from Lexington, Ky., does the same thing at the Bombeck Family Learning Center, reaching out to gather in a 5-year-old heading home early.

"Hi buddy," Johnson tells Nathan Jemison, lifting him high, wrapping him in a bear hug. "So you're not feeling so good?"

Nathan wraps his arms around Johnson's neck, burrowing his face closer and breaks into a big grin, murmuring "uh huh."

As Johnson gently puts him down, a string of tiny 5-years olds — who just barely come up to his knees — file past headed to the classroom where he did a year-long practicum. Each one greets him in turn: "Hi Mr. Branden." "Hi, Mr. Branden."

As an African-American man, Johnson is a rare sight in an elementary school classroom and even rarer that he's an early childhood education major; according to the U.S. Department of Education, fewer than 2 percent of U.S. teachers are African-American men.

Rochonda Nenonene, director of the University of Dayton's Urban Teacher Academy, sees a great need for male teachers, especially in urban schools, where changing family structures mean more children are coming from single-parent homes.

"It's sometimes important to see someone who looks like you who can show you what it means to be a man," she said. "You see a passing down of experience and role models of men on a trajectory for success."

Men have an important — and different — perspective on early childhood education that's especially beneficial to little boys, said Shauna Adams, department chair of early childhood education.

"Men bring a special value that helps children develop an understanding of gender," Adams said. "And they teach differently and play differently. Up until the third grade, education tends to be taught from a female perspective that can disadvantage boys."

"Men are more comfortable with more roughhousing play. They help boys practice the storytelling play that's so essential as they begin to develop the skills they'll need for reading. Boys often do this storytelling through rambunctious superhero play many women teachers don't understand and perceive as aggressive," she said.

If boys are discouraged from playing in this way, their ability to develop this foundation skill for reading can be disrupted, Adams said.

But it's a tough sell. Both Adams and Nenonene said it's difficult to recruit men into elementary education and the Urban Teacher Academy, which prepares future teachers for careers in urban settings.

Nenonene said the academy currently is pushing to recruit Latino teachers to help fill the growing demand in districts where the Hispanic population is on the increase. But it's tough attracting men to the traditionally female-dominated field.

"Men tend to be drawn to business or other fields," she said. "And when men go into education, many of them go further into administration, which takes them out of the classroom."

That's not an issue for Johnson, who said he intends to stay in the classroom and probably coach as well.

Teaching runs in his family — his mother has a day care center in Lexington where he works during school breaks. Both of his parents support his career choice, he says; his work at the center has demonstrated "how good I am with kids."

He relishes being a part of the excitement when a child learns something new, and he relishes the sense that his work in this field is important.

"I think having male teachers in general is beneficial. Having a strong male is especially important for African-American kids," he said, adding that his biracial background adds another benefit because he brings a multicultural understanding to the classroom.

Adams said Johnson isn't the first football player she's seen as an early childhood education major; during the last few years she's noticed more than a few, although she can't explain the connection.

Maybe the word is getting out there's something that rivals football for excitement.

When asked what's the bigger thrill — scoring a touchdown or helping a child like Nathan learn and grow, Johnson doesn't hesitate to answer.

"About the same," he said, breaking into a wide smile.

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