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Male primary teachers: Disadvantaged or advantaged?

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1. Introduction

Over the past decade, there has been a gradual decline in the number of male primary teachers in Australian primary schools. As the number of male primary teachers has slowly diminished, cries of 'we need more male primary teachers' have flourished in media and populist discourse, within education systems and in government inquiries in both Australia and the rest of the Western world. In 2004 the Australian Federal Minister for Science, Education and Training even proposed an amendment to the Sex Discrimination Act to provide scholarships for male primary teacher education students.

Whilst this recent political debate and the preceding debates commonly assume that more male primary teachers are needed and that they will automatically benefit both boys in schools and society in general, many other important considerations are silenced and overlooked. In particular, attention is seldom paid to the experience of male primary school teachers. This paper examines the experience of male primary school teachers and the advantages and disadvantages that they face as a result of being employed in a job that society commonly regards as 'women's work'.

These findings emanate from my recent unpublished doctoral thesis, *Male primary teachers: The experience of crossing over into pink-collar work*. In this study, I explored the experience of male primary school teachers and the ways in which their work is constructed and represented by both society and the media. The study only focused on the part of male primary teachers' experience that differs from female teachers, even though many of their experiences are common to those of female primary teachers. The study did not examine whether a teacher's gender has any effect on the learning outcomes or the experience of boys or girls in schools.

2. Research methods and methodology

Relevant literature, media discourse analysis, statistical analysis and life history interviews provided the understandings about the experience of male primary teachers found in this study. The research methodology for this study can best be described as a qualitative approach that has been enriched by feminist poststructural understandings.

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The research question about the experience of male primary teachers falls within a broad range of areas of interrelated knowledge and diverse bodies of **literature** such as work / labour, gender, sexuality, identity, bodies, minorities, tokenism / minorities and primary teaching. **Media discourse analysis** included an examination of Australian newspapers between 1994 and 2004. Both newspaper headlines and articles were analysed to provide data on the prevailing societal discourses about male primary teachers expressed in the media over the past decade. Media discourse analysis was chosen as a research method because of the assumption that media discourse simultaneously reveals and shapes societal attitudes, and that these have an important bearing on the experience of male primary teachers. A series of semi-structured **life history interviews** were conducted with male pre-service teachers, male primary teachers, female primary teachers and female teacher education lecturers to gain understandings about the lived experience of male primary school teachers. **Statistics** were collated and analysed to provide descriptive research data about the number of male primary teachers and pre-service teachers in Australia over the past couple of decades. Together these various research methods and methodologies provided the means to understand the complex experience of male primary teachers, and to identify the prevailing societal discourses about them.

3. Statistics on male primary school teachers in Australia

Before examining the experience of male primary school teachers, it may be helpful to first examine the accuracy of societal and media assumptions about the decline in the number of male primary school teachers and pre-service teachers. The statistical data examined in the study[1] revealed that many of the current claims and assumptions about the decline in male primary school teachers and pre-service teachers in Australia are inaccurate and misleading. The statistics reveal an extremely complex and uneven picture of decreases and increases of male primary teachers and pre-service teachers over recent decades. Whilst it is true that there has been a significant decline in the number and percentage of male primary teachers employed in Australian government primary schools, the number and percentage of male primary teachers in the independent sector has actually increased. Similarly, whilst the number of males completing primary teacher education courses has decreased, the number and percentage of males enrolling in primary teacher education courses has increased. It is most important to note that despite the small percentage of male primary teachers, the majority of Australian primary school principals remain male. Some key statistical findings about male primary teachers and pre-service teachers in Australia are summarised below:

- the overall number and percentage of male primary teachers in Australia has decreased steadily over the past two decades. Between 1984-2002, the overall number of male primary teachers has fallen from 26,949 to 23,885 and the percentage from 29.68% to 20.87%

[1] The statistical data was obtained from the Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Schools Australia* series and the Department of Education, Science and Technology, *Selected Higher Education Statistics* series

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- the number and percentage of male primary teachers in Australian government schools has fallen significantly. Between 1984-2002, the number of male primary teachers in government schools has fallen from 22,791 to 17,541 and the percentage from 31.84% to 21.07%
- the number of male primary teachers has increased in Australian non-government schools and the percentage has slightly decreased. Between 1984-2002, the number of male primary teachers in non-government schools has risen from 4,158 to 6,345 and the percentage has fallen from 21.64% to 20.35%
- the number and percentage of males enrolling in primary teacher education courses has increased in Australia. Between 1989 and 2001, the number of pre-service males enrolled has increased from 3,548 to 4,231 and the percentage has increased slightly from 18.33% to 18.63%
- the number and percentage of males graduating from primary teacher education courses has decreased in Australia. Between 1989 and 2001, the number of pre-service males graduating has decreased from 1,480 to 943 and the percentage has decreased from 19.18% to 18.16%

4. The experience of male primary teachers

As a result of synthesising the relevant literature and sources of data, this study has found that the experience of male primary teachers is likely to be complex, contradictory and problematic. Their choice to cross over into women's work such as primary teaching appears to yield a unique and complex combination of advantages and disadvantages. Allan notes that being a male primary teacher is a simultaneous source of advantage and disadvantage (1993, p. 121). The various sources of literature and data in this study offer differing constructions as to whether male primary school teachers are advantaged and / or disadvantaged. Most commonly, the sources tend to privilege either the disadvantages or the advantages and silence the other. More rarely, they acknowledge and accommodate both. On the whole, the disadvantages are better articulated, understood and documented than the advantages, which are often silenced and ignored.

This study has identified eight categories of disadvantage and four categories of advantage that male primary teachers may experience. It must be noted that whilst categorising the experience of male primary school teachers as a series of disadvantages or advantages is a helpful way to manage complex material, it is also simplistic and problematic. It is acknowledged that many experiences are more neutral or subtle than this and cannot be classified as either an advantage or a disadvantage. At other times advantages are ambiguous and are buried within disadvantages, and vice versa. Allan notes that males' accounts of their experience of being a primary teacher are a 'social landscape filled with contradictions, in which each advantage, based on gender, carries with it potential disadvantages' (1994, p. 2). It is also important to note that whilst I refer to the experience of 'male primary school teachers', I am not positing them as a unitary or homogeneous category who will necessarily share the same experiences. Rather, I am merely referring to a series of generalisations that are found within the literature and data.

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5. Disadvantages and problems that male primary teachers may face

As a result of synthesising the literature and the data contained in this study, it has been shown that male primary teachers experience many disadvantages because of their maleness. I have collated these disadvantages into eight categories that are described below.

The negative reaction of family, friends and society to their decision and difficulties in training to become a primary teacher

The literature, life history interviews and media discourse revealed that the decision to become and the process of becoming a primary school teacher are problematic for most males. These sources commonly reported that the males are likely to receive some negative reactions from family and friends to their decision to become a primary teacher. The males' decision to become a primary school teacher appeared to come as a surprise for many of their families. The literature showed that the majority of males enter female-dominated occupations via a trapdoor, with little planning or anticipation of this choice. Williams and Villemez note that the few men who do cross over into women's work did not intend to do so. They claim that 'the majority of men seem to enter female-dominated occupations, not through a revolving door, but rather through a "trapdoor" - most were not seeking such entry' (1993, p. 66). The interviews concurred with this and revealed that most of the male pre-service teachers arrived at primary teaching by default rather than as a result of planning or a sense of vocation. Whilst the males also received encouragement and support from their family and friends, most of them articulated some difficult reactions from important people in their lives, such as their parents. The literature suggested that men and their fathers will generally introduce males to the world of work and it is possibly a disruptive moment for families if sons follow the work of women and their mothers. Webb claims that sons prefer to be introduced to the workplace by the father, and that it is a vicarious experience of power for the son to see his father at work (1998, p. 130). It was also apparent that as well as experiencing a negative reaction about their decision to become a primary teacher, the males often found their time of teacher training to be isolating and challenging. In particular, they reported difficulties with their practicum experiences, as they struggled to come to terms with the reality of working with women and children.

Identity construction as a 'real man' whilst doing 'women's work'

The vital role that work plays in the construction of the various parts of the self, such as identity, gender, sexuality and bodies was comprehensively covered in the literature. It revealed that work and identity are inextricably linked and that work frequently provides people with a sense of belonging and a way to structure their sense of self. Kondo suggests that work provides people with themes and patterns, the means of participating in a meaningful organisation and a 'significant axis around which their identities could be constructed' (1990, p. 277). Whilst the connection between work and the construction of identity was not explicitly dealt with in the interviews, the difficulties of constructing a viable masculine identity whilst working in the primary school setting were nevertheless implicit. 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

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work. Allan discusses this contradiction by stating that 'if the male role is defined oppositionally as "doing nothing feminine", what can men do to model "being a man" while employed doing work typically performed by women? (1994, p. 9). 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.

Societal perceptions of risk and sexual deviance

The literature, interviews and media discourse all concur that male primary teachers face significant difficulties and disadvantages because they are often regarded by society as being risky and sexually deviant. Regardless of whether these suspicions are made explicit or remain implicit, it is clear that they impact enormously on the lives of male primary teachers. Such perceptions result in constant suspicion and surveillance about their behaviour and sexuality and sometimes result in their position becoming untenable. Most of the interviewees suggested that these negative societal perceptions had impacted enormously on the lives of male primary teachers. They noted that questions are frequently asked about the males' motives and sexuality, and that they are commonly assumed to be paedophiles and / or homosexuals, with the two often being erroneously conflated. The inference of homosexuality appears to be derived from their choice to work with women and that of paedophilia because they have chosen to work with children. King describes below the reasons for such accusations:

> When a male does choose to break the social taboo of working with women, there are serious consequences to be paid. 'Primary male' (or male primary teacher) has been so crafted that it implicitly includes negative, low prestige features, such as 'feminine', 'homosexual', and 'pedophile'. These cultural and semantic loadings on the 'male primary teacher' are, in my opinion, why the voices of these professionals are muted. And with silence, we lose the chance to interrogate those unspoken accusations (1994, p. 11).

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. The interviews showed that the attitudes about male primary teachers that are expressed in the media also have an enormous impact on their experience.

Whilst very little literature exists on the implications of taking male bodies into non-traditional work, the interviews with male primary teachers clearly revealed that this process is problematic. Most of the interviewees expressed concerns about the risks associated with their inhabitation of a male body in a primary school. In particular, the males spoke of the tendency of young children to want to touch their teachers' bodies and the teachers' need to touch children when they need comfort and assistance. The female teachers acknowledged that this is an enormous issue for male primary teachers and were extremely supportive about their difficulties. Both male and female teachers agreed that male teachers should never touch a child. However, one female primary teacher also noted that the situation was complex as children were 'touch sensitive' and needed to

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touch and to be touched. This points to an irreconcilable dilemma for male primary school teachers.

Unrealistic societal expectations that they will provide role models for boys

The media and interviews contained a great deal of evidence that male primary school teachers are currently expected to act as role models and surrogate fathers for boys in schools. These beliefs were also evident in a more nascent and emergent form in the literature. Although this discourse assumes that all boys need male role models, particular concern and panic is expressed about boys in female-led single parent households. This discourse is based on essentialist thought and presumes that male teachers teach differently to females and meet different needs for boys in schools than female teachers. It also assumes that the presence of more male teachers will automatically improve educational outcomes for boys, such as an increase in literacy levels, happiness and well being and a reduction in behavioural problems. Allan comments that in 'practice, male role modeling emerges as a kind of optimistic ritual approach to solving social problems: No one knows what it is or how it works, but let's do it anyway' (1994, p. 8). The interviews with male primary teachers showed that some supported the notion of being role models and others rejected it. Those who rejected the notion pointed out that their main role was to be an educator and not a parent substitute. Regardless of whether they accepted or rejected the notion, it is clear that the demands place unrealistic and confusing expectations on male primary teachers. The confusion appears to arise from both the conflation of parenting and teaching inherent in the current calls for male primary teachers to serve as role models, and from the contradictions of modeling masculinity whilst doing women's work.

The dominance of the discourse of nurturance

The literature, media and interviews revealed the current dominance of the discourse of nurturance in Australian primary schools. This child-centred discourse positions teachers as being caring, empathetic and patient. It stands in stark contrast to previous primary school discourses that were more didactic, hierarchical and teacher-centred. Many of the interviewees suggested that male primary teachers felt more comfortable with these earlier approaches because they permitted a physical and emotional distance from the children and didn't call on males to be so nurturing. King points out that current 'social construction of "primary teacher" has been loaded with features that surround the constructs of "female" and "mother" 'and that 'the relationship between social constructs for primary teacher and mother are nearly isomorphic (means, 'being of the same or of like form') in the minds of the culture' (1994, p. 11). This study has shown that the discourse of nurturance poses significant difficulties and obstacles for male primary school teachers. The literature revealed that males often construct their masculinity by doing nothing feminine (Allan 1994, p. 3), and it is unlikely that they will be adequately prepared for the world of caring and nurturance, even if they are willing to position themselves as nurturers. If they are seen to be too close or caring with children, they also run the risk of being accused of being a homosexual or paedophile. In addition, the

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current expectations for them to be role models for boys positions them as sporty, fun, manly father substitutes and not soft and caring nurturers.

Status and pay issues

A great deal of literature and media coverage addresses the status and pay issues affecting male primary teachers. Whilst the status and pay of teaching is the same for male and female teachers, the males construct this as a disadvantage because they perceive that they are sacrificing the higher status and pay that are rightfully theirs and that they would be earning in another career. The literature reveals that society regards men who cross-over into women's work as stepping down because they are awarded lower pay and status than they would receive in men's work (de Corse and Vogtle, 1997, p. 38). Most of the interviewees indicated that low pay is an ongoing issue for male primary teachers and that they are concerned and unhappy they are earning less than their male friends in other careers.

Working with women, loneliness and lack of socialisation

The literature and media document many examples of the social isolation and loneliness that male primary teachers experience because females statistically dominate primary teaching. The majority of the male interviewees acknowledged that they struggle with being a minority and with having mostly female co-workers. Most of the males appeared to hanker for male camaraderie and resolved this by clustering with other male teachers in the school, male principals and the janitor. Kauppinen-Toropainen and Lammi's research on male primary teachers in Scandinavia revealed that 'men found it difficult to fully integrate into female-dominated work teams and they missed male companionship' (1993, p. 101). In the absence of other adult males to cluster with, many of the male primary teachers spend recess and lunch in the playground with school students rather than socialising with female teachers. The literature and the interviews noted that male primary teachers both exclude themselves from the socialising networks of primary schools and feel excluded from them (Williams 1989, p. 102, 118). The literature, media and interviews all point to the problematic social implications for males in women's work such as primary teaching.

Pressures and extra work because of the declining number of male primary teachers

The interviews with male primary teachers pointed to the effect on morale and workload that the declining number of male primary teachers is having on the remaining male teachers. Some of the males suggested that the declining number of male primary teachers places extra burdens on the remaining male teachers and further exacerbates other pre-existing problems such as isolation and loneliness. Examples of the extra duties they experience include attending most of the school excursions and camps to meet the required ratio of accompanying males and getting a disproportionate number of male children in their classes because of the increasing requests from parents for their sons to have a male teacher. The statistics confirmed that the overall percentage of male primary teachers in Australia has declined quite markedly in recent years, with a significant

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decline in the government sector. There was no mention in either the literature or the media of the increasing workload for the remaining male primary teachers.

6. The advantages that male primary teachers may enjoy

As a result of synthesising the literature and the data contained in this study, it has been shown that male primary teachers also experience many advantages because of their maleness. I have collated these advantages into four categories that are described below.

Positive discrimination in gaining employment

There was some evidence in the literature that male primary school teachers appear to receive positive discrimination in gaining employment because primary schools are so keen to secure more male teachers. Allan's research documents three reasons for this apparent preference for employing men above women:

> Respondents claimed that men were preferred due to (a) their institution's commitment to affirmative action; (b) the desire of male principals for male companionship and support; and (c) the public's demand for male role models in the classroom (1993, p. 116).

Whilst the media does not mention this or any other advantages for males, the life history interviews provided evidence of the positive discrimination they receive. The male pre-service teachers acknowledged that they had heard anecdotal evidence that males would receive positive discrimination in securing employment, and most were hopeful that this would be the case. In contrast, most of the male qualified teachers did not mention any advantages. However, the female primary teachers and teacher education lecturers and pointed to the many ways that male primary teachers are advantaged in gaining employment compared to female primary teachers.

Positive discrimination in gaining promotion

There was a great deal of evidence in the literature that male primary teachers anticipate rapid career advances into promotional positions and enjoy positive discrimination in gaining promotion (Robinson and Huffman 1982, p. 166; Kaufman 1997, p. 120; Bradley 1993, p. 20). Once again, this was not mentioned in the media, but featured significantly in the interviews. Whilst the male pre-service teachers were not able to comment on whether they will benefit promotionally, some commented that they intend using their primary teaching qualifications as a stepping stone to other careers. The qualified male primary teachers did not refer to any promotional advantages, and some even suggested that female teachers are more advantaged than they are. In contrast, the female primary teachers and female teacher education lecturers made several comments about the rapid promotion of males. The statistical data also provides ample evidence of male primary teachers' advantaged status and positive discrimination in promotion. In particular the statistics reveal that despite the declining percentage of male primary teachers, the majority of Australian primary school principals remain male.

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Being mentored, noticed and appreciated

The literature suggests that male primary school teachers are more likely than females to be mentored and appreciated and that their token / minority status causes them to form special alliances with male principals and to be noticed and stand out in positive ways. Allan notes that male primary teachers 'formed special relationships with male principals, often socializing together in the principal's office or the lounge as part of their daily routine' and that male principals use male teachers as allies whose support they can count on (Allan 1993, p. 117). As was common with the other categories of advantage, there was a silence on this in both the media and the interviews with male primary teachers. In contrast, the female primary teachers made many comments about the way that males are mentored by male principals and receive a great deal of kudos and gratitude from parents for providing role models for their sons.

Developing specialisations

There is a small but significant amount of literature that documents the way that male primary teachers carve out specialisations and niches as a means of separating and differentiating themselves from their female colleagues and aligning themselves with safe, traditional signifiers of masculinity. These specialisations advantage the males because they are able to shape the job in ways that enhance their enjoyment of it and their career prospects. Williams suggests that seeking ways to do different work within the same job is a means of asserting superiority and even securing economic advantages over women (1989, p. 133). In the primary school these specialisations may include taking responsibility for sport and information technology and teaching upper primary classes. Parents and students often regard these duties as being the most prestigious in the school. There was no evidence of any of these specialisations in the media, but some of the male and most of the female interviewees provided ample evidence of their existence.

7. Strategies to address the issues

It is extremely challenging to develop and implement strategies to address the problems and disadvantages faced by male primary teachers as most of them stem from societal and media attitudes that are extremely difficult to counteract. In addition, whilst it is vital to address the legitimate disadvantages male primary teachers face, attention also needs to be focused on the advantages they enjoy, as these frequently translate into disadvantages for female teachers. However, there are some things that can be done to redress the disadvantages for male primary teachers without disadvantaging female primary teachers. It seems that one of the most important places to start is to provide more support for existing male primary teachers, rather than just focusing on attracting additional male teachers. Until schools and education systems listen to the experience, disadvantages and problems faced by their existing male primary school teachers, it is counterproductive trying to attract new males to a work situation that is unsustainable in the long term. The statistics reveal that whilst the number of males going into primary teacher education courses continues to increase, the males are not remaining in our primary schools. The following strategies can be employed to provide greater support for existing male primary teachers and to address some of the disadvantages and problems they face:

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- Opportunities must be created whereby schools, education systems and teacher training institutions listen to the experience of existing male primary school teachers and pre-service teachers. It is vital that they feel that their experience has been heard and understood, so that the issues they are facing can be articulated and addressed
- Clear guidelines must be provided on how male primary teachers can protect themselves from unnecessary risk and allegations of impropriety. This will necessitate substantial professional development and ongoing conversations about the difficult and vexatious issues they face
- More realistic and sophisticated stories about male primary teachers are needed in the media to inform societal debates about the real experience of male primary teachers and to debunk the myth that teachers are substitute parents. It would also be helpful if the media could stop casting male primary teachers as either heroes or villains
- Social and support networks are needed for male primary teachers, particularly those who have no other male teachers in their school. This will have the effect of making them feel less isolated
- Attention should be given to issues such as the gender balance of students in male primary teachers' classes and on the number of extra curricular activities male primary teachers are asked to attend

8. Conclusion

Despite the significant understandings found in this study about the experience of male primary teachers, the paucity of Australian material signals the need for further research into their experience. In particular, schools, education systems and teacher training institutions need to create opportunities to listen to the experience of male primary school teachers. Ways need to be found to provide better support and preparation for existing male primary teachers and pre-service teachers, such as providing professional development, informed discussion and guidelines on relevant issues.

In the light of the dominance of the 'we need more male primary teachers' discourse, there is an urgent need to be explicit about why more male primary teachers are needed, what problems they are supposed to overcome and how their presence will help. This investigation will need to consist of research into the needs of both boys and girls in primary schools, and whether the teacher's gender has any effect on their learning outcomes or school experience. If it is decided that more male primary teachers are genuinely needed, then realistic ways of attracting and supporting them must be addressed. However, given the current difficulty in attracting male primary teachers, it may be helpful to accept that whilst an ideal world would consist of teachers that represent a diversity of gender, race, age, class, and experience, in the absence of this, it is not desirable to pursue positive discrimination or social engineering to achieve this.

It is also important to pursue some of the anomalies thrown up by the statistics in this study. In particular, it is necessary to inquire why the number of government male

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primary teachers is steadily declining whilst the number of independent male primary teachers is increasing. A further important question is why the percentage of males enrolling in teacher training is increasing whilst the percentage of those completing degrees is not.

It is also imperative to find ways that the experience of male primary teachers can inform and shape the prevailing societal and media discourses about them. These discourses will need to accommodate the complex and contradictory experiences of male primary teachers and to acknowledge both the disadvantages and advantages they face as a result of their maleness. When sufficiently sophisticated and nuanced discourses about male primary teachers are developed, debates about them can move forward to genuinely meet the needs of male and female primary school teachers, students, schools and education systems.

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