

Janet Smith, Boundary Crossing: Males in Primary Teacher Education 1

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Boundary Crossing: Males in Primary Teacher Education

A Work in Progress

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The Problem/Question

A statistical snapshot of students entering the Bachelor of Education (Primary) course at the University of Canberra (formerly Canberra CAE) from 1975 to 1994 reveals disparities between male and female students.

While a small, but significant number of males (average 22%) continued to enrol in Primary Teacher Education, a smaller percentage of males than females completed their degrees. In summary, the statistics reveal the following trends:

- female enrolments outnumbered male by a ratio of approximately 5:1;
- males ranked primary teaching lower down on their 6 UAC choices;
- males enrolling in primary teaching had a lower average TER than females; and
- males discontinued their studies at a higher rate than females.

These findings, while probably offering no surprises, led me to questions of why males enter primary teaching and what were the experiences which caused so many to discontinue their studies.

These questions were quite different to those generated at the

beginning of the study. My initial questions centred on the 'problem' of females continuing to enter primary teaching in a traditionally stereotypical way, and on the 'problem' of the continuing under-representation of males in primary teaching. The shift in my questions, focus and perception of 'the problem' resulted from the statistical findings and my immersion in a broad range of perspectives and paradigms. The interviews which I conducted as part of the study also caused me to review and refocus my questions.

Questioning why males enter primary teaching also led to an examination of the nature of primary school teaching itself. Descriptors of primary teaching found in school leaver job guides typically list the personal characteristics needed in a primary school teacher as being

patience, empathy, nurturing skills, flexibility, tolerance, kindness, compassion, gentleness and affection.

I found it helpful to analyse these characteristics in the light of understandings about binary oppositions or logic. Binary logic places pairs in unequal opposition to one another, the first term becoming primary, ascendant and positive, and the second term becoming secondary, inverted and negative. Derrida, as quoted by Gross (1986:27), refers to this as the logic of 'A' and 'not A'. The 'not A' is thus cast as an 'other'.

The characteristics of primary teachers listed above could be said to be associated with the 'female' or righthand side of binary pairs, or to be 'culturally coded feminine'. The following table of binary pairs should help to illustrate the placement of characteristics people associate with primary teaching;

MALEFEMALE

theorypractice

conceptionimplementation

reasonemotion

objectivesubjective

hardsoft

mindbody

firmgentle

It is difficult to think of an other occupation, with the possible exception of childcare, which would be solely made up of terms from the female side of the binary table. Nursing would once have fitted this category, but its recent 'elevation' to an applied science degree has now helped it straddle the binary divide.

This then leads us to the question of why males would choose to enter primary teaching. Pleck maintains that '. . . maleness and femaleness are defined oppositionally. In the case of men, being a man means

"doing nothing feminine" (as quoted in Allan, 1994, p. 4). If this is so, what would make them risk identification with characteristics and codings traditionally associated with the feminine and with femaleness?

If we accept that primary teaching has traditionally been aligned with characteristics which are 'culturally coded feminine', we are left with questions as to how and why young males would cross this boundary at such a formative stage in their lives. Why are they positioning themselves in an occupation traditionally associated with females? Possible reasons for their decision to enter primary teaching could be because they:

- believe their particular skills and interests match the 'culturally coded feminine' primary teaching descriptors given above;
- reject the 'culturally coded masculine' descriptors needed for occupations traditionally associated with males;
- desire to be cast as 'heroes' entering a non-traditional career area;
- believe that it is possible to 'fast-track' through the primary school promotion system;
- have stumbled into the career by de-fault (possibly due to a low TER score or inability to get into preferred courses);
- wish to reconstruct what it means to be a primary teacher (away from the traditionally nurturing role); or

- are unaware that primary teaching is a female dominated workforce.

While historically there were some important incentives for males to enter primary teaching in NSW/ACT, these incentives have now ceased. Such incentives included the provision of NSW Teacher Education Scholarships, and male teachers' ability to 'fast-track' through the promotion system at the expense of females whose careers were interrupted or terminated by marriage and childbearing. The loss of these incentives makes the decision of the small, but significant, number of males who enter primary teaching even more curious.

My searches revealed that very little work had taken place in Australia on issues surrounding the education and entry of males into primary teaching.

Research Approach: Living with Ambiguity

When I began to search for ways to address these questions, I considered it important to find methods which were compatible with my perspectives and understandings. Just as I believe our research should be linked to the questions that are important to our lives, I believe

our research methods should be consistent with our values and perspectives.

Lacan (as quoted in Lather 1991, p.4) says '. . . to read does not obligate one to understand. First it is necessary to read . . . avoid understanding too quickly'. My reading has engaged me in a three way conversation between feminist inquiry, postmodernism and recent developments in qualitative research. The focus of my endeavours has increasingly become the posing/naming and generation of productive questions, rather than the finding of 'answers'. I am struggling against the desire for answers, and as such I am engaged in what Bernstein has so nicely termed a '. . . confrontation with the lust for absolutes, and for certainty in our ways of knowing' (as quoted in Lather 1991, p. 6). The seeking of answers can so easily lead us into closure, generalisations, universalising and new metanarratives. To quote Zimiles, '. . . it can also lead us to ask only answerable questions' (1993, p. 375).

Some of the most interesting and productive questions are to be found in the spaces which are silenced, unnamed, uncontested, 'common sense' and taken for granted. The challenge then lies in the naming and denaturalising of our normative assumptions. I take seriously Jane Flax's challenge to '. . . make the familiar strange and in need of explanation' (1990, p. 21). Consequently, I must struggle to live with the uncertainty, complexity, ambiguity and contradictions necessary for the posing of new questions and ways of framing debates.

Interviews/Oral History Method

Because I focussed my questions on the decision of males to enter primary teaching and on their experiences during their training, I felt that conversations with the students would be the most appropriate research method. I wanted to get at the complex web of feelings, ideas, values, meanings to which I believed only conversations could lead me. I hoped that interviews would allow me to achieve the contextuality, depth and nuance unattainable through less dangerous, but more remote methods. So I decided to conduct semi-structured interviews/oral histories with all of the male University of Canberra students who were in the final years of their primary teacher training.

The students' narratives would therefore become the text. My aim with

this text would be to follow Lather's challenge to '. . . engage and disrupt the text, analyse it in terms of absences, find a position outside its assumptions' (1991, p. 5).

While I felt that the benefits of using interviews outweighed the problems, and that conducting interviews was the most helpful method of gaining understandings to my questions, I nevertheless had to come to

terms with certain problems/dangers and ethical dilemmas associated with using interviews/oral history. I found comfort and encouragement from the immense body of oral history literature, such as Sherna Gluck's edited works, generated by feminist researchers who have grappled with similar dilemmas. I do not believe we can await a perfect research method before proceeding. The following considerations required working through.

- Although I had no illusions about the possibility or desirability of 'neutrality', my positions and perspectives would inevitably become situated in the texts.
- I had to deal with two separate subjectivities (interviewee and interviewer).
- I was a female trying to gain understandings of the experience of males.
- The narratives of others could become a site of interpretive conflict. At what point did 'their' story become 'my' story?
- Would I 'hear' only those things which reinforce my own paradigms and hypotheses?
- How would I come to terms with the knowledge that the students' stories would ultimately become data and grist for my 'ethnographic mill'?
- The interviews inevitably set up unequal power relationships which were hierarchical e.g. interviewer vs. interviewee, researcher vs. researched.
- How would I safeguard against abuse of intimacy, betrayal and manipulation?
- Meaning may be altered in transcribing spoken words into written text.

The Interviews

I interviewed all of the six males left in the final years of the Bachelor of Education (Primary) course at the University of Canberra. Each interview took between 45 minutes and 1 hour, and participants were asked to choose a pseudonym. My questions in the semi-structured interview generally included at least the following (other clarifying questions were also asked).

- Could you tell me about your decision to become a primary teacher?
- What was the reaction of family/friends?
- Did you anticipate advantages or disadvantages as a male?

- Did you view primary teaching as a female dominated profession?
- Could you tell me about your experience of being a Bachelor of Education student:
 - in the Faculty of Education?
 - on Field Experience in primary schools?
- There are very few males left who began with you at the beginning of your degree. Can you tell me why this may be so?
- Could you comment on the culture of primary schools and how you fitted into this as a male?
- What do you think of your employment prospects and what are your short term and long term ambitions?
- Do you have any other observations, comments or experiences on being a male in primary teacher education?

The Narratives

My aim in interviewing the six students was to gain some understandings of why these males had decided to enter primary teacher education, and what had been their experience while training. It was not my intention to generalise or find universal patterns or 'truths'. However, as I listened to the six stories and later worked with the transcripts, I was overwhelmed by patterns, similarities and configurations. I found it necessary to revise my position of avoiding any generalisations or universalisations.

While it is important to note patterns, it is equally important to recognise simultaneously the complexity, paradoxes, inconsistencies and contradictions both between and within the students' stories. Somehow the experience of the individual must inform the general, and the recognition of the general patterns must lead us to look again at the experience of the individual. Haug asserts that '. . . if a given experience is possible, it is also subject to universalisation. What we perceive as "personal" ways of adapting to the social are also potentially generalisable modes of appropriation' (1987, p. 44).

The following patterns emerged, in at least 4 of the 6 stories of these 'survivors'.

1. Previous Experience

The students:

- are 'mature-age' students (none came directly from year 12);
- did not have a long-standing desire to become a primary teacher (all but one had another career first);
- entered primary teaching when another career/course of study reached a dead-end;
- had some prior familiarity with the primary school environment, e.g. parent/relative/good friend is a teacher, parent on school board, parent employed in a school;
- had some prior active link with young children, e.g. sports coaching, youth groups;
- made reference to an exemplary primary teacher who had taught and inspired them;

2. Reactions to Their Career Choice

The students:

- experienced a combination of negative and positive reactions to their decision to enter primary teacher education, e.g. several experienced very negative responses from their fathers and other male friends and most experienced positive feedback from significant females;
- enjoyed the experience of being a male in primary teacher education while they participated in their academic units in the Faculty of Education;
- were less enthusiastic and had mixed feelings about their field experiences in primary schools;
- expressed a great deal of ambivalence towards becoming a primary school teacher;

3. Gender/sexuality

The students:

- either explicitly or implicitly signalled to me their heterosexuality;
- all mentioned that "we need more male primary teachers", expressed as both their own belief, and that of friends and schools;
- saw male primary teachers as offering something essentially different to female primary teachers;

- all mentioned the 'problem' of fulfilling the nurturing/caring aspects of primary teaching, while keeping physical and emotional distance from children (all spoke of being constantly warned by schools and the University to keep their distance from children and the dilemmas this posed);
- expressed great discomfort and confusion at the notion of being a 'token' male;
- expressed confusion about the fuss primary schools made of them because they were male;
- all saw themselves as 'marked' or different as a male, both during their academic units and during their field experiences (most acknowledged they had taken up more than their share of space in tutorials);

4. Other Commonalities

The students:

- had difficulty in talking about why so many of their male colleagues had left (if they legitimised the other males stories too much, that delegitimised their own decision to stay);
- gave reports of 'taking on the system' in the Faculty, and had a sense of their own 'agency' by making complaints, challenging tutors, speaking with the Dean.

The Crossing of Boundaries

For the purpose of this paper, I shall focus my remaining discussion on boundary crossing, and pay particular attention to the difficulty the

male students confront with the issue of nurturing.

The messages that male trainee teachers receive from schools, fellow teachers, their family and friends appear to be contradictory and ambiguous. They traverse a complex landscape with boundaries drawn around their gender and primary teaching. It seems that male trainee teachers have at least three different boundaries they must encounter. The confrontation with each boundary necessitates a bewildering and confusing journey.

The first boundary to be encountered is that between 'male' work and 'female' work. Despite a plethora of recent work on the experience of females participating in non-traditional fields of study, very little interest has been shown in the participation of males in non-traditional work. This seems to be a further example of taking the

masculine patterns and position as normative, and continuing to cast females as a problem or 'other' in need of assistance. It is time to cast our gaze onto the male experience and constructions of masculinities.

The second boundary is that between the university and primary schools.

The students indicated in their interviews that they found the experience of being a male in the Faculty of Education a fairly enjoyable one, while the experience became more complex and contradictory when they participated in Field Experiences in primary schools. Could it be that this journey takes them from the academy, where what is taken as universal and normative can be said to be coded masculine, and primary schools, where what is taken as universal and normative can be said to be coded feminine?

The third boundary is between what is and what is not acceptable nurturing behaviour for males. The interview transcripts included with this paper illustrate the commonality of experience shared by these male trainee teachers in finding a 'nurturing space'.

The difficulty in finding a 'nurturing space'

The male students experienced ambiguity, confusion and dismay at the contradictory messages they receive about themselves as 'nurturers'. The confusion seems particularly evident when teaching in the younger grades. It appears problematic for the students to find a space where they can display the nurturing behaviour they believe to be part of the duties of a teacher, and to show the necessary caution required of male teachers. James King's draws our attention to conflicts around notions of sexuality in his study on male elementary teachers in the United States. He claims that '. . . a public perception is that men who teach primary grades are often either homosexuals, pedophiles, or principals (in training) (1994, p. 4). King claims that while we overtly entice young men to consider elementary teaching, we covertly monitor them and their sexuality. He sees it as '. . . quite possible that a sensitive, nurturing male could be perceived by others as providing a role model that is inappropriate for young boys. Some parents may not want their children exposed to nurturing, caring and 'soft' males' (1994, p. 9).

The male trainee teachers thus experience the confusion of being under surveillance and find themselves 'between a rock and a hard place'. They find it necessary to display 'signs of masculinity' (which could include a booming voice, a cool and aloof demeanour, being a disciplinarian, or positioning themselves as computer expert, science specialist, sports organiser) which are possibly expected by both parents and the school to prove they are not a 'soft' or 'risky' male. In line with this they are also constantly warned to keep their

distance from the children, never to touch a child, and never to be

left alone with one. However, the males are aware that the predominantly female staff in primary schools are able to freely exhibit the qualities of caring and nurturing which they believe to currently constitute an essential characteristic of primary teaching.

Conclusion

As this is a work in progress, it would be premature to develop any conclusion. Indeed, a conclusion or closure would also be inappropriate within the methodological frameworks used.

However, it is clear to me that current constructions of primary teaching and current constructions of masculinity are problematic when merged. This necessitates revising the current agendas and debates within teacher education.

We must replace the statement that "we need more male primary teachers", which is currently a popular agenda item with the press, education authorities, schools and Faculties of Education, with more thoughtful and sophisticated questions. Do we believe male primary teachers are essentially different to female primary teachers? If we decide we need more male primary teachers, what sort of 'male primary teachers' do we need, and how do we train them? Are our constructions of masculinity and of primary teaching compatible?

It is also important for schools and universities to be aware of the implications for male trainee teachers as they traverse the complex and problematic terrain of 'nurturing'. Our enquiries must be directed towards constructions of masculinities and the implications for the recruitment and training of our male primary education students.

James

Did you anticipate any disadvantages being a male?

Yeah, I did actually. I thought being a male in the classroom, it's not a problem as far as discipline or classroom management goes, there's no problem there at all. One thing that I find is if a child in any situation, with my nephews or nieces, or with my students, if a child needs to be consoled or something, then you know, a hand on the head or even a hug now and then, or in the same manner if they need to be disciplined, a hand on the shoulder or a hand on the head, no, I mean I don't agree with capital punishment or anything like that. But as a male I feel you're being watched far more closely in those situations. And I think it's part of a child's development that if they have the role models whether they're male or female, and if you're a teacher then you're an important part of a student's life, you should be allowed to use those methods as long as they're not crossing the boundaries. But as a male I've found that that was really, really closely. . . well, we're spoken to about it to start with at

university. And then when you go to the school you're warned off any contact with children whatsoever. And I think the children miss it as well as the teachers missing it as a useful part of their teaching practice.

Daniel

They were both advantages in the two areas you've outlined, did you see any disadvantages?

The disadvantage of being male is public opinion of males in that you

can't give a kid a hug, a cuddle, you can't be alone with a kid - whether they be male or female. All those difficulties that are riddled into our system, and for good reasons - I can understand them, but make it so hard for males to show that little bit of affection which kids want. They want it from an adult - they're not interested whether its a male or a female. They're looking for that comfort zone that comes from an adult. And I think that really hurts where they can get it from a female teacher without so much feedback from parents. It's not questioned within society, but if it comes from a male, its really hard. And you battle within yourself, to have to remember about it - I do. I mean, if a kid has fallen over, scraped their knee, they're bleeding, whatever, I want to be able to comfort that child straight away. Little ones, you know, its horrific, its the end of the world, they're going to die that minute. And you want to be able to pick them up, you want to be able to assure them, comfort them, then deal with the problem. Whereas a male teacher, forget it, you can't do that.

Daniel

Maybe you can tell me about some of your Field Experiences. I mean, just how you found it going to primary schools and how you reacted to the culture of schools, and your relationships with Associates etc, too.

Every school warns you that you're male and that you must be ever so careful. Every Deputy Principal seems to warn you of this as soon as you walk in the building. I think as soon as they're told that they're getting a male they prepare this speech, this big long spiel, and you've heard it a thousand times before, you're really fed up of hearing it. It's like you've got to, not prove, you've got to justify the fact that you're male, walking into some of them.

Joey

The lectures, just the general coursework. I mean, how you felt, how you responded as a male to some of the sorts of things that were in the

curriculum materials.

Yeah, there's always been a lot of people point out the fact that you are a male. And I know when I've gone out onto pracs, one of the first things you get is "don't be alone with one or two children" and things like that. And that is a little disappointing. I mean, I can understand it entirely, and wouldn't want to get into trouble for it or anything, but it's also a little a sad that because I'm a male, I can't be trusted. Which, sort of can hurt at times. And even just in tuts, particularly the first couple of years, there was a lot of emphasis on not singling out the boys or the girls and things like that. But that wasn't a problem for me.

Henry

Let's have a look at your Field Experiences, then.

. . . And so I then proceeded into this class of year ones which weren't a bunch of angels at all and I particularly struggled being a male in that class. Like sitting down and having the girls at your feet rubbing their hands up your leg and all that sort of stuff. Not knowing how I was meant to react to that. Going on playground duty and everybody, all the girls wanting to hold your hand and all that sort of stuff.

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