

Men in Primary Teaching: An Endangered Species?

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A collaborative research project investigating the conflicts and tensions experienced by male primary teachers and their career choice motivation is currently under way in NSW. The project aims to investigate the views of male primary teacher education students, senior secondary school students, male primary teachers and careers advisers regarding reasons why males study or do not study primary teaching. The study will also examine factors identified by teachers and students influencing their staying in or withdrawing from the teaching profession. A crucial final stage will be the development of strategies by employing authorities and Australian Catholic University to address the decline of male applicants in primary teacher education programs. This paper reports on the first stage of the research project.

Introduction

A “feminisation” of the teaching work force is occurring. According to Australian Bureau of Statistics data there are distinct changes occurring in the gender structure of pre-primary to secondary teachers in Australia. In the period from 1986-87 to 1997-98 the number of male teachers dropped by 4%, while the number of females increased by 21%. In 1997-98 males constituted 30% of the work force, compared to 35% in 1986-87 (ABS Labour Force Surveys, 1999).

In Catholic primary schools in NSW and the ACT males currently constitute 20% of the work force, though the proportion of male classroom teachers is lower because men are over-represented in school executive positions (Catholic Education Commission, 1997). Teacher educators and principals report many primary schools with no male classroom teachers at all, or large schools with just one or two male staff members. Of people leaving teaching in the prime of their careers (35 - 49 years of age) males drop out at more than double the rate of female teachers (ABS Labour Force Surveys, 1999).

At the tertiary level the number of males in pre-service primary teacher training appears to be declining. Year 12 boys do not regard teaching, and primary teaching in particular, as a worthwhile career. Enrolments of male primary students at the Strathfield campus of Australian Catholic University (ACU) in 1993 represented 21% of the total student population, whereas by 1999 the numbers had declined to 10%. Such reduced numbers of males choosing primary teaching are a cause for concern to educational administrators and systemic policy makers and have wide-ranging educational and social ramifications. Among other factors the lack of male role models or authority figures in schools has been associated with discipline problems, the greater incidence of behavioural and learning difficulties among boys and their poorer academic achievement (Smith, cited by Armitage, 1999).

Choosing teaching as a career

The profession of teaching has traditionally been regarded as a suitable career for women and as less suitable for men. Since the end of the second world war the male primary school teacher has been variously regarded as morally suspect (Tubbs, 1946), out of place (Kaplan, 1947), or someone who should be actively dissuaded from making such a career choice (Levine, 1977). It is significant that similar negative beliefs have recently reappeared in the media focus on child sexual abuse and child protection issues.

In the past two decades many researchers have advocated that men should play a role in primary teaching in order to counter the “feminised” environment (Brophy & Good, 1973) or to help break down traditional gender stereotypes by acting as role models (Greenburg, 1977). The prevailing wisdom of such positions is that there will be less incidence of behavioural and learning difficulties among boys, discipline problems will be reduced and boys’ academic achievement will improve if they are exposed to a wider range of male teacher personalities by increasing the number of men in schools. Connell (1996) provides a conceptual framework derived from research into the education of boys which clearly points to the need for such male role models in primary schools.

Yet the issue of whether the lack of balance between male teachers and female teachers in primary schools really matters was raised by Yee (1973). Yee advocated that the staffing of schools had less to do with gender than with important qualities in the teachers involved: the common personality traits of men and women teachers that influenced how they interacted with children. This view continues to maintain support and has recently being described as the “so-what” factor (Smith, cited by Armitage, 1999).

The traits which male and female teachers shared in common were identified by Seifert (1985). Both genders were motivated equally in liking children, being willing to serve the school system, but at the same time felt isolated by their work and emotionally drained by it. An additional burden imposed on men was learning to cope with reactions of surprise on behalf of parents and the public to their role as a male in teaching.

In relation to pre-service training, research suggests that the demand for primary education courses is shaped by the interests of the applicants. Among all students entering teaching the highest proportion indicate predominantly social interests, with the foremost of these being in helping others (Harvey-Beavis & Elsworth, 1998). In helping students, however, it is also highly likely that a male teacher will experience conflict between fulfilling a societal demand to be a role model, yet having to undertake work typically performed by women (DeCorse & Vogtle, 1997). In this job his role will often be solitary, in an environment where his colleagues are females, likely to be of the same age as his mother, and where his only male company is likely to be the general assistant or the principal (Smith, cited in Armitage, 1999). DeCorse & Vogtle explain that failure to resolve the above conflict is likely to be at least one explanation for the low proportions of males engaged in primary education and the decline of enrolments in primary teaching programs (1997).

Other important factors limiting male participation are suggested by Farquhar (1997) and Smith (cited in Armitage, 1999) including:

- low social status of the primary teacher
- poor wages in relation to the work performed
- low social status
- limited career path for those not seeking administrative roles
- the labelling of male primary school teachers as homosexual or not “real men”
- the current media spotlight on allegations of child sexual abuse

- the fear of being labelled as a paedophile
- the impact of child protection policies in schools.

Education employing authorities are showing concern regarding the low numbers of males involved in primary education and the decline of enrolments in primary teacher education programs. Policies are currently being developed to create a better gender balance by attracting more males into teaching. This research project aims to assist these initiatives by:

- mapping the current situation regarding male applicants and graduates from primary teacher education programs;
- investigating the reasons why males are/are not applying for primary teacher education programs;
- documenting factors which have contributed to the retention of male students in these programs;
- evaluating the effectiveness of strategies developed by the employing authorities and the Australian Catholic University to address the decline in male applicants.

The study has been planned in 3 major stages. Table 1 which follows outlines the phases in Stage 1.

Stage 1 - Understanding the issue and its context

| <i>Action</i> | <i>Status</i> |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Critical review of the literature to identify factors related to male applicants' choice of primary teacher education. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Initial literature search has been completed |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus group meeting of ACU year 4 male students regarding their perceptions of primary teaching | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus group meeting completed |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Request CEO Sydney to undertake survey of Year 12 students career choices regarding teaching | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Data has been collected by CEO Sydney and is currently being processed by ACU |

Table 1 - Stage 1 of the research project

This paper reports on the second phase of Stage 1, investigating reasons why a group of primary teacher education students made their career choice and exploring the tensions and conflicts experienced and identified by them in teaching.

Research plan, methods and techniques

A focus group of eight male final year B.Ed (primary) students was set up at the Strathfield campus of ACU. The interviewer provided a focus question and a number of sub-focus

questions to the group, allowing discussion to occur without making any comments himself. The following questions were discussed:

Focus question:

1. Why have you chosen and continued studying to be a primary teacher?

Sub-focus questions included:

2. What do you see as your role as primary school teacher?

3. How do you think society regards you as male primary teacher?

4. How do you think parents will regard you as male primary teacher?

5. What do you see as some of the challenges and difficulties ahead for you as a male primary school teacher?

6. What experiences or people have assisted or deterred you in becoming a teacher while at ACU?

7. Do you think teaching offers a suitable salary and career path?

8. What are the roles currently undertaken by men in schools?

Results

A number of key issues emerged from the views expressed by the year 4 male students during the focus group discussion. The views of participants were examined and clustered into three major fields which dealt with: social issues; issues involving masculinity, often related to child protection; and issues involving the status and working conditions of teachers.

Social issues

1. There was a sense of personal and social efficacy expressed in participants' decisions to play a role in caring for and helping children. This was particularly apparent in the words of Carl*, a mature age student, who stated:

"I have always been able to respond well with children and they have always responded well to me. Having that is a bonus on top of being able to teach..."

Michael, who had previously done volunteer work with children, revealed that he discovered that he had good rapport with them and this made him more confident in his ability to deliver as teacher. Associated with participants' confidence was the enjoyment of:

"watching children learn, watching them grow and shaping and moulding them." (Carl)

2. There was a sense of social justice driving participants. These students felt that they had a contribution to make to the school and society in the occupation of primary teaching. Carl stated:

** Names of participants in this study have been changed to protect privacy.*

"I see a male role model in the school as somewhat of a father figure."

adding importantly that:

"This is the kind of role that the children like because of the single parent and divorced kind of thing that is happening today."

Malcolm spoke of his experience in schools with a majority of female staff and his belief that more males in these schools would open up more opportunities for children, especially in the area of sport. The balance of male to female staff in schools should reflect the society in general in order *"to create a proper environment."* A belief was also expressed by Robert that schools with a better balance of male and female staff members had a better atmosphere and were more *"human"* than schools where the balance did not exist. Robert's field experience in schools made him conclude that male primary teachers were more *"blokey and jokey"* and relaxed with their classes more, whereas the female teachers he had encountered were *"more serious"* in their dealings with students.

Issues relating to masculinity and child protection

1. The participants agreed that many males do not regard primary teaching as a "masculine job."

"It's just like they think primary teaching is like baby sitting." (Carl)

Paul pointed to the need for:

"more male teachers who are good role models, rather than the weird nerdy ones."

In reflecting on his own school experience in the United Kingdom he recalled that:

"the male primary school teachers that I had were the weird, nerdy ones, not ones that you would look up to or aspire to be like - I suppose that they were the misfits that didn't fit in anywhere else..."

Despite the limited view of teaching expressed by other males, the participants unanimously saw themselves as strongly fulfilling a masculine role in schools that was necessary, demanded and expected, especially by other female staff members. Participants masculine roles in schools included fulfilling sporting, information technology and handyman duties. One participant referred to a female administrative assistant who stockpiled jobs for male students teachers to do in the school. It was significant that participants did not view the fulfilling of masculine roles negatively. Rather, it was seen that great opportunities existed for males in primary teaching, as long as you were not the only male in a school.

2. A particular tension which was felt by all participants was the fear of being labelled as a possible child abuser:

"because there has been such bad publicity in the press, and a lot of it has been directed against males." (Carl)

All participants were aware of clear guidelines given in protective behaviour policies in studies at university and in schools.

Carl stated that the issue of child abuse was always something that was at the back of his mind and was something that he worried about. He was concerned that he could no longer even put his hand on a child's shoulder in order to comfort or make a child take notice. There were strong feelings on this issue expressed by other participants:

"I think people are actually worried about this type of thing. Is it really worth going through four years of study, going out and there teaching for a couple of years when one incident which is probably totally innocent could jeopardise your whole career? A kid goes home and tells his parents and it your word against theirs." (Sam)

"Even if you are innocent, the accusation is enough. I hate the way it affects your teaching style and reputation as well. If a female teacher can put her arm on someone's shoulder, why can't we?"

(Malcolm)

"You can't just console someone with your arms folded..." (Jack)

3. Participants agreed that there were positive aspects as far as parents' views of their children being taught by a male teacher. It was felt that parents would expect that children were getting the discipline that they demanded and they would be happier with both male and female teachers supervising children in the playground. Paul believed that having more male teachers might encourage fathers to be involved in the child's education and the daily life of the school. Pressure from parents in relation to his gender was felt by Michael on his first day on a kindergarten class as a casual teacher:

"I went to the bathroom and I came back to put things in the room. I went out to the lines and the principal made an announcement that made me feel affirmed. But it's that initial reaction, the initial shock factor of seeing a male... Well the pressure was on and I felt ticklish inside, to make sure I did the right thing... I felt that if it was Year 6 I wouldn't have the pressure from the community point of view."

Michael thought that the parents might be asking themselves some questions as they scrutinised him, such as:

" Couldn't they get anyone else?"

Has he taught kindergarten before?"

"Does he know about it?"

"Is it going to be like that movie ? [Kindergarten Cop]"

Issues relating to the status and working conditions of teachers

1. The need to enjoy being a teacher was rated more highly than a high salary.

"I suppose it's how you view the job. For myself the type of job I want to be doing is something that I am enjoying. Money is not important as long as I am enjoying myself, living a life and that's probably the most important thing." (Michael)

There was an acceptance that, because schools were government and fee funded, the system could not afford to pay teachers the salaries that their work deserved and that equivalent work outside would attract double the starting salary.

2. One participant had actually been deterred by his teachers at high school from entering teaching. As he stated:

"I mean that's [teaching] what you really want to do, so I don't see why I should have been deterred from it. If a teacher is saying don't do it, then who are we supposed to listen to?" (Jack)

3. Mixed opinions were expressed regarding the status of teachers in the community. There was optimism that the status of teachers was low but was on currently on the rise, that teachers in country towns were still held in esteem and that high school teachers had more community status than primary school teachers. This was wrong because:

"children do more learning in primary schools." (Michael)

Discussion

The data collected by the focus group investigation illuminates what research already says regarding the experience of males in primary school teaching. Three major fields were identified within views expressed by participants. Personal and social imperatives were manifest in participants career choice in that they felt the call to help and care for students and were confident in their own abilities to deliver education. Tensions and conflicts were experienced due to the demand of being a male role model in a predominantly female environment, and in relation to child protection and masculinity issues, and status and working conditions issues.

Two findings within this study are most significant. The first is the very strong depth of feeling expressed by participants regarding child protection policies and the difficulties created for male teachers in the current climate of allegations or insinuations of sexual abuse. All participants were strongly affected by this issue and were constantly aware of it. Secondly, the revelation that teachers actively discourage students from becoming teachers confirms existing anecdotal evidence and should be of great concern to the educational community, especially as Australia faces a national teacher shortage in the early years of the new millennium.

Future Directions

The data collected by this study will provide a framework for the next stage of the collaborative research project in which Year 12 students prospective career choices regarding teaching will be surveyed. The responses given by the participants in the focus groups will be useful in devising the survey instrument to be used to assess the opinion of Year 12 students.

A number of recommendations can be made as a result of this study:

1. The presence or absence of male teachers has major implications for the culture of schools and the education of children. Education employing authorities and university administrators have shown concern regarding the low numbers of males involved in primary education and the decline of enrolments in primary teacher education programs.
2. Educational administrators, systemic policy makers and school executive staff need to be much more aware of the difficulties experienced by males entering primary teaching, especially in relation to child protection issues. Educators will need to honestly address tensions existing among male teachers and prospective teachers in regard to the issue of child protection and recognise the pressure currently placed on these teachers.
3. The status of teaching needs to be raised. This subject has recently been examined by an inquiry of a committee of the Australian Senate (Commonwealth of Australia, 1999). Teaching needs to be made a more attractive career choice, especially for men, so that the trend of declining male enrolments can be arrested and the drop out rate of male teachers decreased. School careers advisers, principals and teachers need to actively promote teaching as a worthwhile career, likely to hold encouraging promotions opportunities in the 21st century, as an aging work force moves into retirement.
4. Factors related to male applicants' choice of careers in primary school teaching will need to be more fully investigated and recruitment strategies developed. Campaigns to recruit males teachers are currently under way in Queensland, Victoria and the United Kingdom but have not necessarily been successful. Further action is warranted.

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