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We Need More Males in Primary Teacher Education! Or do we?

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1. Introduction

This paper investigates whether more males are needed in primary teacher education and primary teaching in Australia, and is based on doctoral research into the experience of males who choose to become primary school teachers. The paper aims to provide a snapshot of the current debates which are taking place in Australia and explores the 'we need more males in primary teaching' lament which has flourished in Australia, and indeed most of the Western world, throughout the 1990s. The paper concludes that the cry of 'we need more males in primary teaching' appears to be an unreflective one, which examines neither the experience of males who have chosen to become primary school teachers, nor the needs of children in primary schools.

Background to this research

In order to determine whether more male primary teachers are needed, this paper draws on understandings gleaned from longitudinal doctoral research into the experience of males who choose to become primary school teachers. This research has included an examination of relevant bodies of literature, a series of life history interviews, a deconstruction of media and populist discourse related to male primary teachers over the past decade and an analysis of statistical data related to male primary teacher education students and primary teachers.

The series of life history interviews were conducted over a five year period and involved male primary teacher education students, male teachers, female teachers and lecturers. The longitudinal research involved a small group of males, who were interviewed during their primary teacher education training to explore their decision to train and their experience whilst training as a primary teacher, and were re-interviewed four years later to chart their experience of becoming a male primary teacher.

The data supplied by the life history interviews was supplemented with statistical data on the percentage of male primary teachers and primary teacher education students in Australia over the past decade, and an analysis of populist discourse related to male primary teachers over this period. Populist and media discourse was examined in order to explore the ways in

which the debates on males in primary teaching has been constructed in the public forum. Newspapers, radio, magazines, books and reports provided a valuable site from which to examine current opinions, attitudes, desires and discourses surrounding the 'we need more males in primary teaching' debate. Such an exploration recognises the role the media and popular press play in shaping public perception, opinion and public discourse.

The data supplied by the interviews, statistics and public discourses led to questions about the acquisition of gendered identity in the workplace, doing work which is non-traditional for one's gender, the labour/gender nexus and notions of otherness. These issues have been largely viewed through a feminist analytical 'lens', and have drawn on disparate bodies of knowledge/literature such as gender, labour, identity, sexuality, organisational theory, discourses of primary teaching, masculinities and feminist theory.

This paper focuses on two of the sets of data collected in my research: the 'we need more males in primary teaching' debate in populist discourse and the statistical data related to the numbers of male primary teachers and primary teacher education students.

2. An Examination of the 'we need more males in primary teaching' Debate in the Media and Populist Discourse

The cry that 'we need more males in primary teaching' has become both commonplace and accepted as 'commonsense' over recent years, and has been expressed by the media, the public and even some sectors of the academy. It is constantly uttered by politicians, journalists, broadcasters, parents, academics and teachers and evidence of the cry may be found in reports and inquiries, newspaper articles, letters to the editor and on talkback radio.

Whilst this paper focuses on the Australian experience, the call for more male primary school teachers should not be viewed as either a uniquely Australian or a recent phenomenon (Coulter & McNay, 1993; DeCorse & Vogtle, 1997; Kruse, 1996; Robinson & Huffman, 1982). Rather, it seems that most Western countries experience cycles of alternately calling for more male teachers and then partially remedying the situation by securing more males. The most recent spate of calls for more male primary teachers in Australia appears to be located in the early 1990s, and seems to be linked to media reports claiming that 'girls are now outperforming boys'. Such claims generated a great deal of media coverage in New South Wales during the early 1990s when it was first reported that girls were outperforming boys in the NSW Higher School Certificate. This 'revelation' began to focus the public's attention on the 'success' of girls and the 'under-achievement' of boys. Media reports stating that girls are now topping more subjects than boys and that boys are being left behind are now replicated in most Australian states each January. Following this annual plethora of media coverage, men's rights activists, politicians and academics participate in the debate and frequently commission government reports and inquiries to address the needs of boys in education. Invariably, the annual debate leads to calls for more male school teachers to be employed to solve the 'problem' of boys in schools. Thus the 'what about the boys?' debate has become discursively linked to the 'we need more males in primary teaching' debate.

When opinions and debates become accepted as commonsense or hegemonic, certain issues are silenced and excluded, whilst other issues are taken for granted and assumed. Issues which have been silenced or excluded in the 'we need more males in primary teaching' discourse include the experience of the males who have chosen to become primary teachers, the opinions of female teachers who will work with the males and the needs of the female students who will be taught by the males. Interestingly, the call for more male primary teachers does not even critically examine the experience of boys in schools,

and makes no attempt to document whether boys in schools will actually benefit from the presence of more male teachers.

An examination of the 'we need more males in primary teaching' cry reveals a set of unspoken assumptions, which usually remain taken for granted by those who participate in the debate. For example, it is generally taken for granted that a 'problem' exists which will be fixed by employing more male primary teachers. Whilst the nature of the 'problem' remains implicit and unexamined, it is nevertheless possible to locate some common beliefs in the cries for more male teachers. It can be seen that those who participate in the 'we need more males in primary teaching' discourse commonly assume some or all of the following:

- the number of males who are training to become primary teachers and are employed as primary teachers is declining;
- primary school teaching is a feminised profession and primary schools are feminised workplaces;
- male primary school teachers would serve as 'role-models' for children, particularly boys, who live in single parent families without a male figure; and
- boys are currently suffering in schools, and that masculinity is facing a crisis.

The evidence found in the media and populist discourse for each of these assumptions will now be examined in turn.

The number of males who are training to become primary teachers and are employed as primary teachers is declining

It is commonly assumed that the number of males who are training to become primary teachers, and the number of male teachers already in schools, is declining. Evocative words such as plummeting, slumping and retreating are used to describe this decline. In December 1995, journalist Stephanie Raethel wrote an article entitled 'Real men don't teach primary school'. She reported that:

New figures show that this year the percentage of male teacher recruits for all schools slumped to the lowest level in five years. Men made up just 22.6% of all teachers recruited for this year - down from a recent high of 31.6% in 1993. The percentage of male teachers in primary and secondary classrooms is also on the decline, with men making up 25.9% of primary teachers and 48.8% of secondary teachers, down from 28.1% and 53.1% at the start of the decade (*The Sydney Morning Herald*, 12 December, 1995).

An article entitled 'Can a boy be a teacher?' in *The Age* newspaper in September, 1996 (author not stated) suggested that the declining number of male primary teachers is an unintended consequence of feminism. It argued that:

Even the most desirable of revolutions have unintended consequences. Feminism, possibly the most defining movement of the 20th century, was about achieving equal rights for women. Those who fought for equal pay and votes for women did not intend that one day little boys might ask: "But, Mummy, can a boy be a school-teacher?" Yet if the present trend continues, in another generation little boys may well be asking that question. In the past decade, the number of male full-time primary school-teachers has declined by 10% while the number of female teachers has risen by 21% (*The Age*, 9 September, 1996).

Steve Biddulph, a family therapist and author who has written extensively on masculinity and raising boys asserts that 'the number of men in schools has plummeted' (1997:127). Biddulph does not cite his statistical source, but believes that:

By the year 2000, at present trends, 95 percent of all Australian teachers will be female. Clearly we have to take steps to bring more men into teaching (Biddulph 1997:180).

Primary school teaching is a feminised profession and primary schools are feminised workplaces

Participants in the recent debates on the need for more males in primary schools commonly label primary schools as feminised workplaces, and believe primary teaching to be a feminised profession. Such a belief assumes that a feminised place or profession is not a place where men would want to be. It is possible to interpret the label of teaching as 'feminised' at several levels, and it seems that those who refer to teaching as feminised also assume different meanings. The 'feminised' label may simply be viewed as a statistical judgment, based on the assumption that the majority of teachers are women. However, it is also possible to read the 'feminised' label as a pejorative one which signifies certain presumptions about the culture, status and appeal of a profession statistically dominated by women. Many of those who label teaching as feminised level the blame for the large number of females towards feminism, the female teachers themselves and even the potential male teachers who do not choose to teach. Regardless of the ascribed meaning, the feminised label always carries negative connotations, and assumes that the trend is a worrying one which needs to be reversed.

A 1994 study, commissioned by the National Board of Employment, Education and Training, *Women in the Teaching Profession*, stated unequivocally that:

Schooling is a feminised industry. There are over 150,000 women working in schools, constituting just over two thirds of the workforce. Further, schooling is becoming even more feminised and indications are that this trend will continue (*Women in the Teaching Profession*, 1994:5).

In an article entitled 'It's a woman's world, but some men persevere', in *The Australian* in December 1997, Monika Melki quotes a trainee primary teacher as saying that 'the lack of men in primary teaching comes from the feminisation of the profession' (*The Australian*, 10 December, 1997). The writer of a recent Letter to the Editor in *The Canberra Times* also unquestioningly assumes the feminisation of teaching. It is interesting to note his positioning of males as role-models and disciplinarians, and of females as vulnerable and helpless.

With the feminisation of the profession there are fewer male teachers to provide role models and back-up for when matters get out of hand. The brunt of discipline falls back on mostly middle-aged female teachers who often find themselves up against young, alienated thugs. God knows how fresh, younger female teachers will cope, or even want to become teachers, when they gain an inkling of what lies ahead (*The Canberra Times*, 6 March, 1999).

The label of teaching as feminised is not a phenomenon confined to Australia. Maureen O'Connor outlined what she believes to be an international issue in a recent article in *Education Review*.

A recent British survey revealed that teaching is more popular with school girls than school boys. This huge discrepancy can give no comfort to those

who think that the 'feminisation' of the teaching profession, already in full swing, will be easy to reverse. The chance of getting more male teachers into primary schools looks bleak, on the basis of this survey (*Education Review*, May/June, 1999).

In 1998, the Australian Senate commissioned an Inquiry into the Status of the Teaching Profession. In her overview, the Chair of the Inquiry, Senator the Hon Rosemary Crowley stated her belief that teaching is feminised.

All is not well in the teaching profession, and it is generally agreed that there is a widespread crisis of morale amongst teachers . . . As well, the feminisation of the profession - that is the high percentage of women teachers - means that prejudiced views about the value of women's work are also a factor (*A Class Act*, 1998:1).

Under the heading 'Feminisation and the Career Structure', the Inquiry notes the following:

Teaching is a feminised profession, if one makes an assessment on the basis of the percentage of the teaching force which is female. In 1996, females constituted 64.4% of the total teaching force in primary and secondary schools, a pattern consistent across government and non-government schools. A high proportion of female teachers is concentrated in primary schools (76.6% in 1996). In secondary schools the gender division is more balanced (52.5% of secondary school teachers were female in 1996) (*A Class Act*, 1998:119).

Some contributors to The Senate Inquiry into the Status of Teaching adopted the feminised label and directly linked this with status.

Teaching was once a respected profession. The demise of this status is paralleled by the feminisation of the teaching profession (*A Class Act*, 1998:121).

A study commissioned by the Commonwealth Department of Employment, Education and Training in 1995, *Women's Participation in Nontraditional Fields of Study at the Undergraduate Level of Higher Education 1989-1993*, accepted the feminised label and offered an explanation as to why more men are not attracted to primary teacher training:

The answers are largely self-evident. Why would men be attracted to vocational studies where qualifications lead to careers which have been traditionally feminised, with inferior status, power, financial reward and career mobility? (*Women's Participation in Nontraditional Fields of Study at the Undergraduate Level of Higher Education, 1989-93* 1995:11).

However, whilst the majority of the participants in the 'we need more males in primary teaching' debate have willingly accepted the feminised label, some voices within the debate have questioned and problematised the label. Such questioning is exemplified by the following contributor to The Senate Inquiry.

The use of the word 'feminisation' can be misleading. Certainly the majority of workers in the system are female and this percentage is growing. Women however, are under-represented in positions of management in schools and systems . . . With women making only very slow inroads into positions of

senior management, and in some cases no movement, the education system remains in the control of men (*A Class Act*, 1998:121).

Male Primary Teachers would serve as 'role-models' for children, particularly boys, who live in single parent families without a male figure

There has been a great deal written in the media and populist discourse about the need for children to have male teachers as role-models. Such an argument assumes that it is the responsibility of the school to provide children who live in single-parent families without a male figure, with male role models. Whilst this argument commonly refers to the needs of 'children' who live in single-parent families, it is nevertheless clear that concern largely lies with the needs of boys and not of girls. Such an argument appears to conflate the roles of teaching and parenting. It is clear that there is some confusion about the role of a teacher, and proponents of this argument do not explain how teachers will provide replacement role-models for parents. It is interesting to note that blame for this situation is often directed towards the women who dominate and 'feminise' primary teaching, but it is never directed towards the males who have fathered the now father-less children, nor even the mothers/guardians of the children who have not arranged alternative role-models.

Biddulph argues that young boys need male teachers as role-models if father figures are not available. In the following passage, which refers to the needs of six to fourteen year old boys, Biddulph summarises his argument.

But his interests are changing - he is becoming more focused on what men have to offer. A boy knows that he is turning into a man. He has to 'download the software' from an available male to complete his development. The mother's job is to relax about this, and stay warm and supportive. The father's job is to progressively step up his involvement. If there is no father around, then the child depends more on finding other men - at school for instance. Yet men are disappearing from the teaching profession, especially in primary schools, which creates a problem (Biddulph, 1997:17).

Phil Dye, an ex-teacher and author on fatherhood, concurs with Biddulph's sentiments, and states that:

It's also a fact that in most Australian infants and primary schools, the vast majority of teachers are women. If parents are leaving their children's value and attitude formation to the teachers, where are the male role models in our schools to help instill values in our boys? Where are the male teachers to help guide and form the attitudes of young men in our society? Sadly, they're missing from the system, and it's time to stimulate a return of men to the teaching service. If affirmative action can promote women into the workplace, affirmative action can promote men into the teaching service (Dye 1998:224).

Raethel wrote in an article in *The Sydney Morning Herald* that:

Evidence suggests boys are falling behind girls in terms of staying on at school and academic performance and that male role models may be important in meeting their needs (*The Sydney Morning Herald*, 12 December, 1995).

The notion of role-modeling was also advocated in a Letter to the Editor in the following way:

The underlying principle of Equal Employment Opportunity is that the workplace staff should reflect the composition of the client group being served. This is not the case in schools. If boys have no men to model their behaviour on, how are they to become men? (*The Canberra Times*, 7 March, 1996).

An article in *The Age* newspaper linked role-modeling to academic performance:

The absence of male authority figures is as unhealthy for children today as the absence of female authority figures was in the past. The lack of male primary school teachers means that children who live with single mothers may have no male role model until they are almost teenagers. Some educators believe the lack of male role models is the main reason boys have performed less well academically than girls in recent years. In any case, all children are entitled to contact with adults of both sexes (*The Age*, 9 September, 1996).

Pamela Bone's article in *The Age*, 'A gender crisis born of staunch masculinity', takes a somewhat different stance. Whilst she unquestioningly accepts the need for male role-models for little boys, she deflects the blame from women teachers.

Little boys have too few male role models, not because women have taken over the education system but because a lot of men still think being a kindergarten or primary school teacher is beneath them (*The Age*, 8 January, 1998).

Boys are currently suffering in schools, and masculinity is facing a crisis

Also subsumed within the 'we need more males in primary teaching' discourse is the belief that boys are currently suffering in schools and that masculinity is facing a crisis in western society. This belief has been summed up with the now familiar catch-cry of 'what about the boys?'. Evidence cited to support this catch-cry includes boys' poor achievement and literacy rates, lower school retention rates, higher suicide rates and low self-esteem. The 'what about the boys?' cry is frequently heard in the media, schools and the academy. This argument commonly levels much of the blame for the problems which boys are facing at feminism, gender-equity policies for girls and at the women teachers who dominate the primary schools. An increase the number of male primary school teachers is commonly offered as a solution to the problems faced by boys.

Stephen O'Doherty chaired the NSW Government's Advisory Committee on Education, Training and Tourism, which was responsible for the 1994 *Inquiry into Boys' Education*. His foreword to the report encapsulates the concerns about boys echoed in the media, popular press, schools and sections of the academy.

A growing community concern about boys' education, together with some worrying educational trends, lead to this inquiry . . . There is no doubt there is widespread concern about boys' education, and a broad coalition of interest in strategies to help boys . . . I am convinced that the problems of boys are real and that they demand system-wide solutions (*Inquiry into Boys' Education*, 1994:3).

Steve Biddulph's introduction to *Raising Boys* argued similarly that boys are having problems.

Boys are often adrift in life, failing at school, awkward in relationships, at risk for violence, alcohol and drugs, and so on . . . In primary school the boys' work is often sloppy and inferior. By the time they reach grade three, most boys don't read books any more . . . By fifteen years of age boys are three times more likely than girls to die from all causes combined - but especially from accidents, violence and suicide (Biddulph 1997:2).

In an article provocatively entitled 'Life's tough if you weren't born a girl', journalist Chris Uhlmann echoes the sentiments expressed by O'Doherty and Biddulph.

Australia's boys are five times more likely to kill themselves than girls, they are more likely to be unemployed and much more likely to die in car accidents. They also are more inclined to drop out of school before Year 12, are therefore less likely to go to university, and are generally less literate than their female counterparts. So why is so little being said or done about it, in the media and particularly in our education system? (*The Canberra Times*, 15 February, 1995).

The Weekend Australian published a full page article in October, 1996, 'Men: The new second sex' (author not stated). The article concurs with the view expressed above, but goes a step further in leveling the blame for the situation at women's quest for equality.

The trouble with men appears early: at school. Though men take up half or more of the university places in most countries, at primary and secondary school girls are increasingly out-performing boys . . . There has been a loser in women's march to something closer to equality and that is the man in the blue-collar uniform (*The Weekend Australian*, 5-6 October, 1996).

3. A Statistical Snapshot

Given the degree of panic amongst participants in the 'we need more males in primary teaching' debate about the dramatic decline in the number of males in primary teacher education and primary teaching, it is necessary to examine the relevant statistical data to determine whether the number of males is declining, and if so, the extent of the decline.

Percentage of Male Teachers Employed in Primary Schools (Australia), 1984-98

An examination of the teachers employed in Australian primary schools 1984 to 1998 reveals that overall the percentage of male teachers employed in Australian primary schools has declined from **29.7%** of the primary teaching population in 1984 to **22.5%** in 1998 (see table 1 and figure 1) (Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Schools Australia series, 1984-98*). During this period, the percentage of male teachers in **Government** primary schools fell from 31.8% in 1984 to 22.9% in 1998 (table 2 and figure 2). However, the percentage of male teachers in **Non-Government** primary schools was relatively constant, with 21.6% in 1984 and 21.3% in 1998 (table 3 and figure 3).

Percentage of Males in Primary Teacher Education (Australia), 1989-98

An examination of the preservice teachers in Australian Universities from 1989 to 1998 reveals that the number of male **Enrolments** in Primary Teacher Education courses in Australian universities has increased from **18.3%** in 1989 to **19.8%** in 1998 (table 4 and figure 4) (DETYA, *Selected Higher Education Student Statistics, 1989-1998*). During this period, the number of males **Course Completing** Primary Teacher Education courses decreased from **19.2%** in 1988 to **17.7%** in 1997 (table 5 and figure 5).

Clearly, these figures reveal an uneven and complex picture which does not concur with the picture portrayed in populist discourse. The statistics reveal a contradictory picture of increases, decreases and maintenance of the status quo. Whilst the percentage of males teaching in government schools and the percentage of males course completing in primary teacher education has declined, the percentage of males enrolling in primary teacher education training has increased, and the percentage of males teaching in non-government schools has remained constant. The only significant decline is in the percentage of male teachers employed in government primary schools. Whilst this is certainly a cause for concern and calls for investigation, it is nevertheless debatable whether the overall decline in male primary school teachers from 29.7% to 22.5% over a 15 year period constitutes the plummeting, retreating and slumping commonly reported in the press.

The anomalies revealed by these statistics, and the dissonance between the need for more male primary teachers expressed in populist discourse and the actual decline revealed in the statistics certainly warrant further investigation. In particular, it is important to explore the reasons for the differing percentage of males in government and non-government schools and to investigate the slippage between the percentage of males who enrol in primary teacher education and those who complete their courses. The different percentage of male teachers employed in different types of schools and the failure of some males to complete their training calls for a thorough examination of the experience of males who have chosen primary teaching as a career. Unless the call for more male primary teachers is grounded in understandings of whether the experience is positive for the male teachers and their students, the call constitutes an unreflective and empty one.

5. Do We Need More Males in Primary Teaching/Teacher Education?

Further research is clearly necessary before we can determine whether more males are needed in primary teaching and primary teacher education in Australia. Firstly, it is necessary to explore the experience of the males who have chosen to become teachers and the needs of the children who will be taught by the males. Secondly, it is important to name and make explicit the problems that the male teachers will supposedly overcome.

Given the impending shortage of teachers in Australia, it would seem important to encourage quality candidates of either sex into teacher training. In an ideal world, our teachers would represent a variety of ways of being and possibilities, and would reflect a balance of gender, race, age, class and sexualities. Ellenberg noted in 1975 that the 'real need in the elementary school is for a better mix of strong, well-integrated human beings, female and male, young and old, black and white' (Ellenberg, 1975:333). This sentiment is most eloquently expressed in the recent Inquiry into the Status of the Teaching Profession:

In the Committee's view the profession should be attempting to attract the best and most suitable people into the profession, regardless of gender. If teachers mirror more accurately the society in which they operate - in terms of gender, class and ethnicity - so much the better. But teaching must remain the primary consideration (*A Class Act: Inquiry into the Status of the Teaching Profession*, 1998:123).

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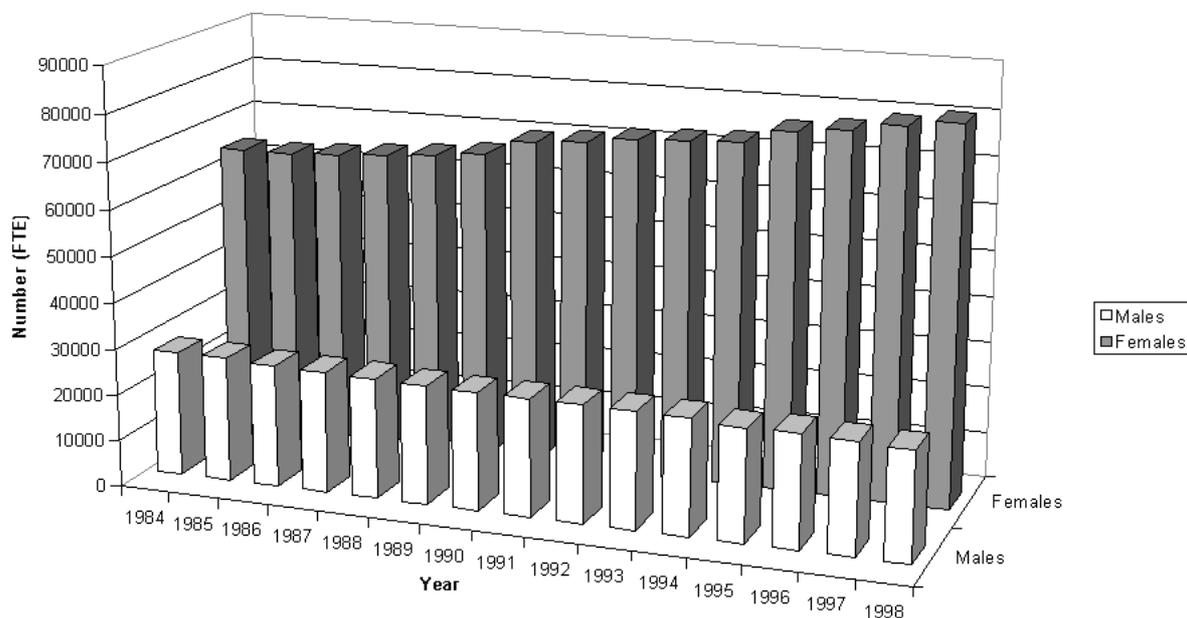
Male Teachers Employed in Primary Schools (Australia), 1984-98

Table 1: Percentage of Primary School Teachers in Australia (FTE) 1984-1998

Year	% Males
1984	29.68
1985	29.71
1986	29.06
1987	28.64
1988	28.28
1989	27.73
1990	26.50
1991	26.26
1992	25.83
1993	25.55
1994	25.30
1995	23.91
1996	23.83
1997	23.11
1998	22.51

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, Schools Australia series (1984-98)

Figure 1: Number of Primary School Teachers in Australia (FTE) 1984-1998



Male Teachers Employed in Government Primary Schools (Australia), 1984-98

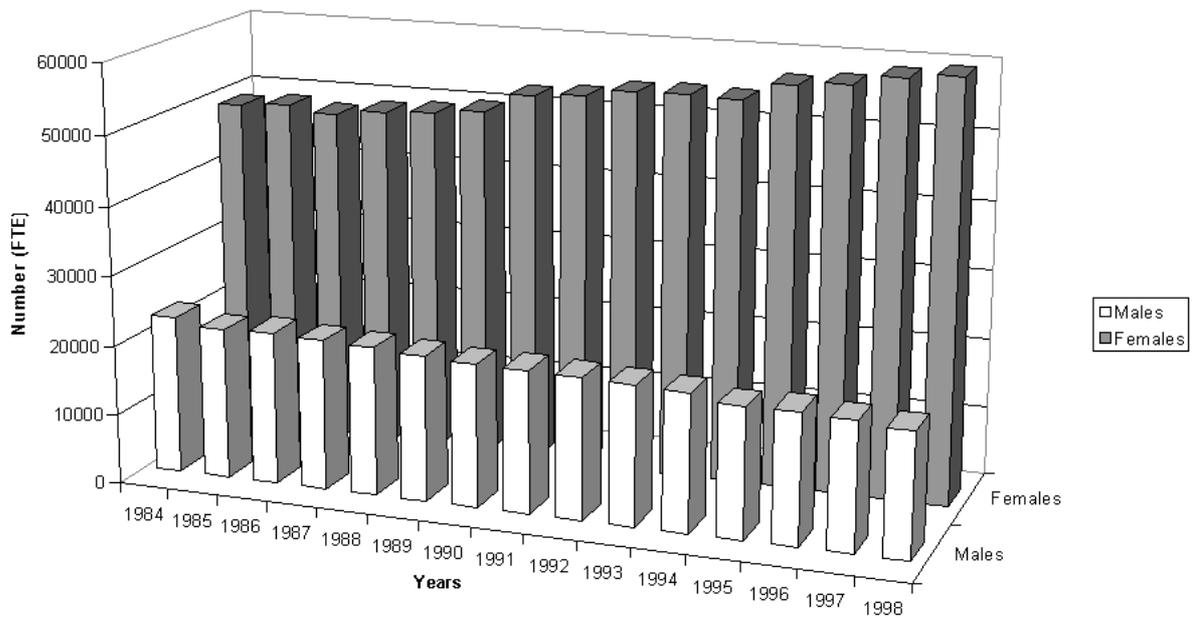
Table 2: Percentage of Government Primary School Teachers in Australia (FTE) 1984-1998

Year	% Males
1984	31.84
1985	30.49
1986	31.14
1987	30.44
1988	30.06
1989	29.37
1990	27.82
1991	27.59
1992	26.96

1993	26.67
1994	26.50
1995	24.59
1996	24.51
1997	23.65
1998	22.94

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, Schools Australia series (1984-98)

Figure 2: Number of Government Primary School Teachers in Australia (FTE) 1984-1998



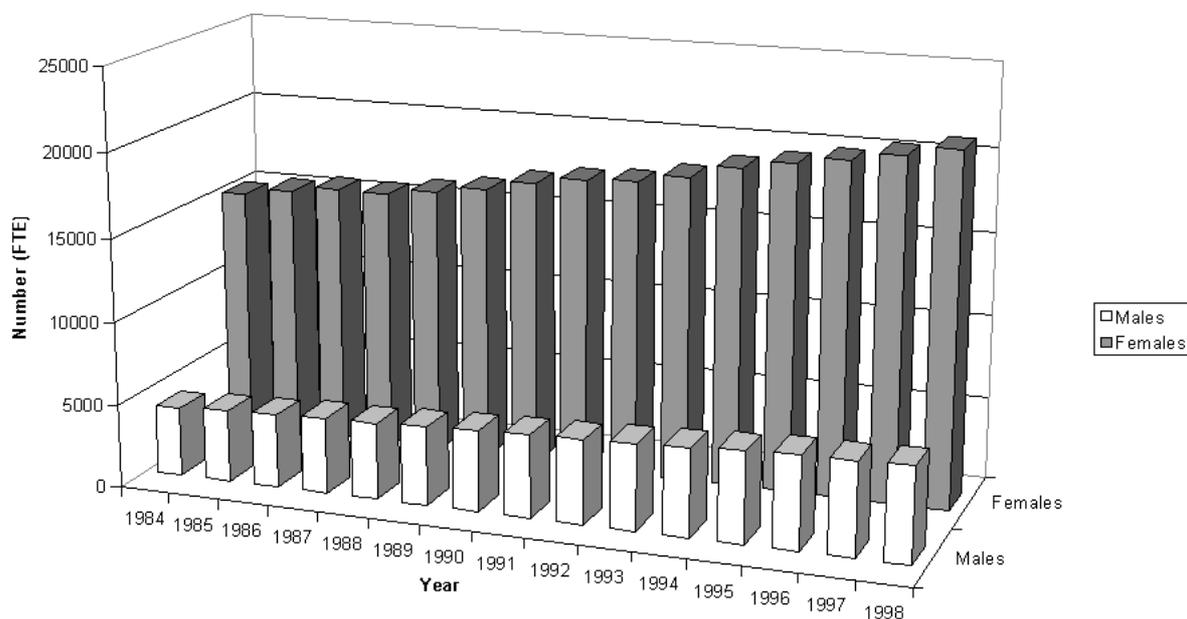
Male Teachers Employed in Non-Government Primary Schools (Australia), 1984-98

**Table 3: Percentage of Non-Government Primary School Teachers in Australia (FTE)
1984-1998**

Year	% Males
1984	21.64
1985	21.83
1986	21.80
1987	22.36
1988	22.21
1989	22.23
1990	22.08
1991	21.90
1992	22.12
1993	21.97
1994	21.66
1995	21.86
1996	21.81
1997	21.48
1998	21.28

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, Schools Australia series (1984-98)

Figure 3: Number of Non-Government Primary School Teachers in Australia (FTE) 1984-1998



Percentage of Males Enrolling in Primary Teacher Education (Australia), 1989-98

Table 4: Percentage of Primary Teacher Education Course Enrolments, Australia 1989-98

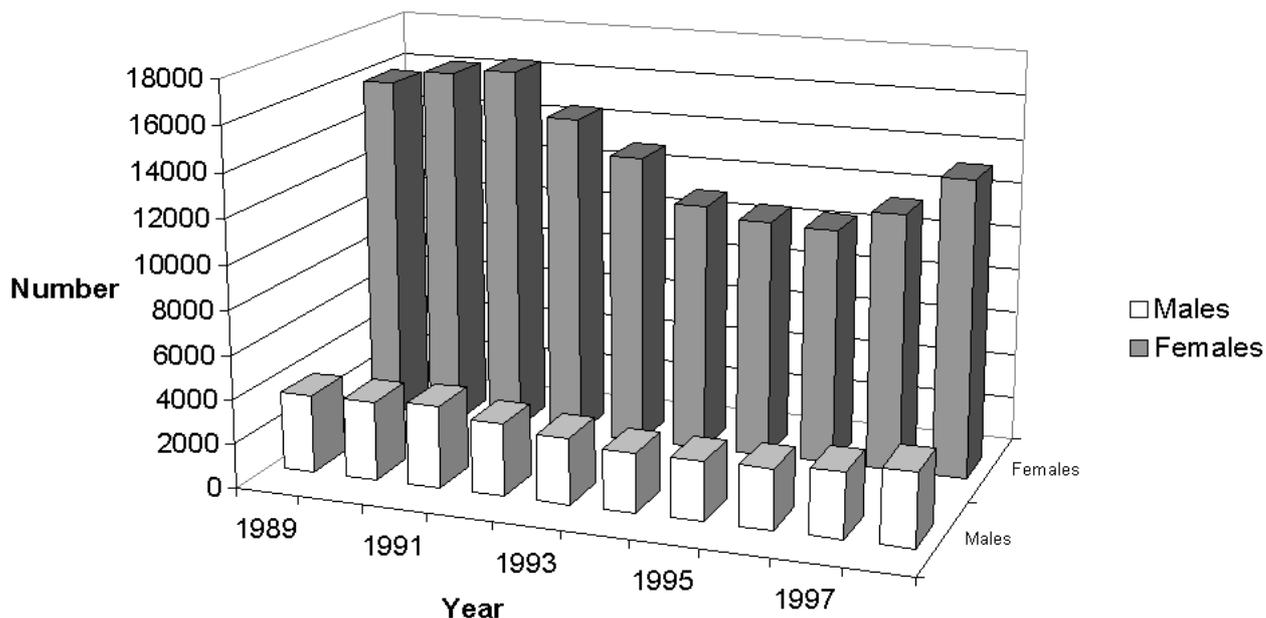
Year	% Males
1989	18.33
1990	17.91
1991	18.15
1992	18.11
1993	18.40
1994	19.11
1995	19.80
1996	20.31
1997	20.13

1998

19.83

Source: Selected Higher Education Student Statistics, 1989-1998, DETYA, University Statistics Section

Figure 4: Number of Primary Teacher Course Enrolments, Australia 1989-98



Percentage of Males Course Completing in Primary Teacher Education (Australia), 1989-98

Table 5: Percentage of Primary Teacher Education Course Completions, Australia 1988-97

Year	% Males
1988	19.18
1989	18.27
1990	17.97
1991	17.11

1992	16.22
1993	15.71
1994	15.52
1995	17.80
1996	18.05
1997	17.70

Source: *Selected Higher Education Student Statistics, 1988-1997, DETYA, University Statistics Section*

Figure 5: Number of Primary Teacher Course Completions, Australia 1988-97

