"Going going....." Why are Males Underrepresented in Pre-Service Primary Education Courses at University?

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Abstract

This sociological qualitative study identifies reasons why female pre-service teachers believe males are underrepresented in primary education courses at Australian universities. The findings of the study suggest that the nineteenth century naturalistic discourse of nurturance continues to sustain the notion that primary school teaching is a female profession. The study argues that this socially-conservative gender discourse remains essentially unchallenged and maintains a significant negative influence on males' willingness to take up a career in primary teaching.

Keywords: Gender, Nurturance, Primary Teachers, Caring, Social Constructionism, Masculinities.

Introduction

The following small-scale qualitative sociological study addresses some of the past and ongoing reasons for and concerns about the underrepresentation of males in pre-service primary teaching courses at Australian universities. Research over the last century confirms that primary school teaching is typically identified as a women's profession and current evidence indicates that most students entering pre-service primary education at university are females (ABS, 2010). An institutionalized gender regime that perpetuates certain masculinities and femininities continues to affect school processes in Australian education (Connell, 1985). To avoid challenging socially-constructed notions of masculinity, men often choose not to take up careers in primary teaching (Smith, 2004; Williams, 1993). This particular study suggests the naturalistic discourse of the late nineteenth century that identified primary school teaching with nurturance (Smith, 2004), has replaced the social and institutional changes brought about by twentieth century feminism. It is argued that this often unchallenged and regressive traditional gender discourse perpetuates the belief that primary teaching is an unsuitable profession for males and as such informs contemporary pre-service male enrolments in primary education courses.

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Background literature

The low number of male primary school teachers continues to be a concern in education and governments throughout the western world are developing strategies to address the decline. Reasons why men are not taking up the profession are complex. Some factors identified for the fall in numbers relate to issues such as: males' unwillingness to work in a female-dominated environment, low status and salary, as well as men's disquiet about working with young children (Connell, 1987; Cushman, 2005; Foster and Newman, 2005; Lingard and Douglas, 1999; Skelton, 2003; Smith, 2004; Taylor, 2004). Cushman (2007) adds however that the inability to attract more men to the profession is not as straightforward as some of the previous research suggests.

Gender discourses of masculinity and femininity are influenced by everyday social practices (Taylor, 2004). Discourses affect knowledge production through language and influence how ideas are put into practice and used to govern what people do (Foucault, 1972). We only pay attention to the way gender is produced when the familiar day to day gender expectations of men and women are disrupted (Lorber, 1994). Social and cultural assumptions about the natural order often characterize males as protectors who are resourceful and strong. Supporting and caring, on the other hand, are attributes generally identified with women. Cultural beliefs are essentially theories about the way the world works and from a naturalistic perspective two sexes equate to two genders (Wadham, Boyd and Pudsey, 2007). Positivism requires a simple definition of what gender is or what men and women are (Connell, 2005). Beliefs concerning human nature and child development reinforce gender differences and make them appear natural or inevitable (Clark, 1989 p. 92). Research by White (2003) for example found both young Australian women and men were of the opinion that child rearing was a woman's responsibility. An understanding of what it means to be male or female however, does not rely on biological differences. More recent theoretical perspectives question modernist assumptions about truth, universality, and certainty (Blaise, 2009 p. 2). Rather than a singular discourse of gender it is now recognized that other social influences such as class and ethnicity shape different versions of masculinity and femininity (Taylor, 2004 p. 89). Connell, Ashenden, Kessler and Dowsett (1982 p. 174) agree that masculinity and femininity are not a simple reflection of one's biological identity. Gender is socially constructed and historically contextual.

Although gender discourses are apparent in wider society they are also a cultural phenomenon in education and a central site of context and practice within schools (Wadham et al. 2007 p. 234). Gender and sexuality have traditionally influenced teaching, and are concepts that significantly affect the attitudes and conduct of those involved in education (Haywood and Mac an Ghaill, 1996; Taylor, 2004; Wadham et al. 2007). Gendered roles in teaching were specifically affected by the introduction of compulsory education during the late nineteenth century. The influx of women to the profession for example influenced males to take up positions that were distinct from those of females. Men's and women's roles were characterized by the age of students and subjects taught as well as the administrative functions each of the sexes performed (Skelton, 2001). As a consequence the perpetuation of an institutionalized gender regime in schools is something that has received only sporadic attention (Connell, 1985). According to Connell schools encourage certain masculinities and femininities while discouraging others. During the 1970s feminism challenged the gender stereotypes found in schools and continues to have an impact on teachers' thinking. Teaching reflects certain types of masculinity and femininity. There is a division among teachers themselves regarding the educational issues that are

constructed around gender (Connell, 1985 p. 138, 183). Male primary teachers for example experience and engage with a range of masculinities and femininities found in schools. As a profession teaching is often seen as an extension of the culturally-assigned nurturing role that is associated with women and as a consequence most teachers currently working in state primary schools in Australia are female (ABS, 2010; Taylor, 2004; Wadham et al. 2007).

The discourse of nurturance, or child-centred approach, that permeates Australian primary schools, identifies teachers as caring, empathetic and patient. This discourse is in direct contrast to the more didactic, hierarchical teacher-centred approach identified in the past (Smith, 2004 p. 6). Smith goes on to say that males were less threatened by earlier approaches because not only was there a safe physical and emotional distance from children but also nurturing was not emphasised. At the secondary level, on the other hand, males have been better represented owing to the general perception that secondary schools are places where 'serious' learning rather than just 'caring for kids' occurs (Wadham et al. 2007). Nonetheless the representation of males in Australian state secondary schooling, in a similar way to the state primary sector, also appears to be in decline (ABS, 2010).

Teachers demonstrate caring in a number of ways: through commitment, relating to others, physical care, mothering and expressing affection. Mothering for example is associated with femininities whereas commitment is not confined to a specific gender (Vogt 2002). It has already been said that a positivist discourse aligns human caring (or mothering) with human nature (Clark, 1989). However, femininity and mothering, characteristics often associated with primary school teachers, are also identified as social constructions (Connell et al. 1982; King, 1994). The culture of nurturance that exists within primary schools challenges the masculine identity of males who work within the primary context because these men are often perceived to be doing women's work. A consequence is that males tend to avoid doing things construed as feminine, including caring, in order to construct a 'normative' masculine identity (Smith, 2004; Williams, 1993). Smith (2004) adds that although men are willing to position themselves as nurturers, they are not prepared for the caring role that is associated with being a primary school teacher, particularly when becoming too close or caring raises consternation among others.

Positioning oneself or having oneself positioned as an 'other' can make individuals feel insecure and uncomfortable. Males who work in a female dominated environment such as a primary school are constantly constructing and negotiating their masculine identities (Francis and Skelton, 2001). Allan (1993) found that female primary teachers doubted the ability of prospective male colleagues to nurture and care: the females' reasoning related to what they thought was men's biological incapacity to be carers. Views that regard caring for primary-aged children, as the natural domain of women need to be challenged (Acker, 1999). It is evident from the literature that the ethic of care or the concept of 'caring as relatedness' is a characteristic more often associated with women. However being responsible for and having an ability to relate to children are attributes shared by both sexes not just women (Vogt, 2002). Vogt's study concluded that when care is understood to be the responsibility and relatedness a teacher has for his/her students then gender is not relevant.

According to Skutnabb-Kangas (2000) it is the universal right of individuals to define themselves. Unfortunately it is the ideas of the dominant social group that preside over the taken for granted categorization of people. Skutnabb-Kangas argues that the names used to describe groups or individuals are symbolic and often related to power. A person's individual identity is shaped by his/her ties with others and who an individual perceives their 'self' to be is both contemporary as well as chronological and always

subject to change. Identity is not fixed but rather something one uses. It is the means by which individuals position and explain themselves in relation to others (Bessant and Watts, 2002; Maguire, 2008). One's identity can also be part of a collective and therefore identity is responsive to changes in the way the group identifies itself at a particular point in time. Boundaries of identification are continually constructed and reconstructed (Barth, 1969; Berger and Luckman, 1967; Goffman, 1959). Skutnabb-Kangas (2000) recognizes that conferring social labels on others is problematic because an individual simultaneously has multiple identities. At any one time an individual can be identified not only in relation to their gender but also in terms of their: culture, class, sexuality, occupation, political affiliation, marital status, generation, religion and geography (regional, national and global). Categorizing people with a single label such as gender is too simplistic.

The literature has summarized and analysed some of the important sociological themes for understanding the effects of gender both within education and throughout society more generally. It is evident that gender discourses have a significant influence on the conduct, attitudes and expectations of individuals within the context of education (Taylor, 2004). The review also demonstrates that schools reproduce certain gender discourses. Many recent investigations into the issue challenge modernist assumptions concerning sex and gender. Current sociological studies have been shown to rely more on social constructionist theories to understand the social relationships between men and women (Connell et al. 1982). There is also a view that the ethic of care when understood as a teacher's responsibility for and ability to relate to students is a characteristic that both men and women share (Vogt, 2002). While people might be classified socially and culturally by others it is how individuals personally identify themselves that is the most important aspect for those individuals in knowing who they really are (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000).

Methodology

This is specifically a qualitative investigation although statistical biographical information, generated from a demographic survey, informs parts of the study. The epistemological assumptions however, concerning the nature of the information generated are subjective. The interpretivist paradigm in which the point of view of the actors is axiomatic to understanding a social phenomenon, underpins the collection, analysis and interpretation of the data (Weber, 1947). The study involves my interpretation of what I understood from the participants' written responses. This methodology is often referred to as the interpretive-descriptive approach (Belenky, 1992; Maykut and Morehouse, 1994).

Data were in the form of short written responses given by participants in answer to the research question "Why are males underrepresented in pre-service primary education teaching courses at university?" The written responses were informed by each individual's personal understanding and experience. It is impractical to infer that the experiences of this specific sample are typical of all students and therefore generalizable. McMillan (2004) suggests that finding a single exemplar representative of others is difficult in qualitative educational research. The study sample, of fifty predominantly second-year female pre-service teachers, enrolled in an introductory research methods course, comprised three separate tutorial groups conducted during second semester of 2012. Descriptions of individuals in the participant sample are constructed from data supplied on the generic demographic survey given by me during the specified tutorials. Participant descriptions include characteristics such as: sex, age, postcode, marital status, nationality and religion. During the tutorials individuals were given an opportunity to reveal what they personally thought about the phenomenon by providing first-hand written accounts based on their own experience.

This study was emergent therefore the collected and analyzed data were used to refine the study's focus (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). A hypothesis was not formulated and there was no attempt to either prove or disprove a proposition.

The participants' written responses were read with Ricoeur's (1976) interpretation theory in mind. The first or naïve reading was followed by a more detailed examination that identified specific units of meaning. Each of the written texts was examined for themes, participants' use of particular words and inconsistencies in an individual's written response. Themes are conceptual labels aligned with events and other phenomena. They are abstract constructs that connect the expressions in the written responses to objects and images (Strauss and Corbin, 1990).

Examples of participant responses

> *Males are underrepresented in uni courses because teaching has always been seen as a female-orientated job. Teachers are thought of as caring, loving, mother-like figures and this matches the stereotypical idea of a female (Sarah 19).*

> *…younger children should be in a maternal setting more suitable for females (Abby 19).*

Preliminary analysis described all of the participants' responses individually. Interpretation of those responses occurred in the next stage of the study. Interpretation while acknowledging each participant's experiences and views separately treated the themes, such as those identified above, collectively. The interpretive approach adopted in this investigation precluded definitive conclusions and findings. Presented are general understandings of what was evident in the data and the questions these understandings raised. The intention of the study was to leave readers of the research thinking about both prominent and uncertain issues (Wolcott, 2001) that relate to the underrepresentation of males in primary pre-service university courses.

Analysis

The analysis of the data did not set out to solve a specific problem but presents a particular point of view regarding the underrepresentation of males in pre-service university courses. The point of view is based on my understanding of the personal written responses given by the participants who took part in the research. The literal and interpretive treatment of the data provides evidence that a significant number of the pre-service teacher sample believed men do not take up primary school teaching because males are not innately programmed for caring. Reviewed and supplementary literature related to gender and gender in education was used to support the interpretation of the data.

This study revealed there are numerous and differing perceptions among pre-service educators as to why males are underrepresented in pre-service primary education courses. Many of the participants' perceptions (indicated below) such as males' reluctance to work in a typically female-environment, the comparatively low status and salary of teaching, as well as men's concerns about interacting with children are consistent with previous research (Connell, 1987; Cushman, 2005; Foster and Newman, 2005; Lingard and Douglas, 1999; Skelton, 2003; Smith, 2004; Taylor, 2004).

I suppose it's because teaching primary students is generally seen as a female job. Women … have the teaching, office type jobs. Males are the ones who should be out doing physical work such as mining etc (Karen 19).

There is a perception in the community that teaching (in the primary years) is a female profession (Rhonda 21).

…there's an opinion in society that females are teachers and men are tradesmen. …if a male became a teacher then others may think that this is a bit odd (Jess 19).

…males might be put off being a primary school teacher as they may be seen as sexual predators for being interested in young children. …younger children should be in a maternal setting more suitable to females (Wendy 19).

…my dad quit teaching because of Mem Fox and a bunch of other feminists. They were openly hostile to him because he is a man and they figured teaching was women's work (Deb 20).

…there are more career opportunities (for males) elsewhere. The pay (in teaching) is not good enough (Samantha 19).

A dominant theme, identified by thirty percent of the participant sample, was the notion that males, unlike females, do not have a natural capacity for caring and are therefore unsuited for primary school teaching.

...females should be teachers as they are known to be more caring and in tune with emotions. This is …how teachers should interact with students, especially junior primary students as female teachers are perceived to connect with younger people better than males (Sally 19).

…males might not possess the qualities primary school teachers need such as warmth and being able to relate to children (Annette 20).

…dealing with children is viewed in many circles as a female dominated field. Even fathers that stay at home are seen as unusual. Childcare seems more prevalent among women (Sheila 25).

The role of the teacher is portrayed as having certain characteristics that are usually associated with the female gender role e.g. caring, mothering, patience etc especially with younger children. The typical male gender role is associated with more 'hands on' trades therefore primary school teaching does not appeal to males (Sue 20).

Discussion

The participant responses suggest that among female pre-service teachers the discourse of nurturance (Smith, 2004) remains a significant impediment to males becoming primary school teachers. This discourse perpetuates the idea that caring is a natural and inevitable characteristic of women (Clark, 1989). What emerged from the data was evidence of those discourses that position males in more traditional, rather than nurturing, roles and the way these discourses continue to influence young people's perceptions of a primary school teaching identity. The data indicate that who or what a primary school teacher should be remains synonymous with socially-constructed notions of females and mothering (King, 1994). Perceptions of the respondents in this study correspond with those found by Smith (2004) which suggest that males who do pursue a career as primary teachers will not necessarily be perceived as effective carers or nurturers even if they are capable in those roles. The data in this study similarly agree with Smith that if males do become close or caring with children they risk accusations of impropriety.

Perceptions of a primary school teacher identity, among this participant sample, remain congruous with traditional social attitudes and expectations of gender. Such socially-conservative views of primary school teachers reflect nineteenth century notions of teaching as an extension of a woman's natural role i.e. mother, nurse and instructress (Steedman, 1985). Social-class issues, in the latter part of the nineteenth century, influenced a trend toward the feminisation of teaching. Ironically prior to this point in time teachers of young children were predominantly men who, it was said as head of the family, were acquainted with intelligent exercise and judicious tenderness (McCann and Young, 1982 pp. 172-174). This often neglected point confirms Connell's (1986) assertion that emphasising gender differences suppresses rather than recognises the natural similarities between the sexes. The suggestion in this study is that the influential gains, in school equality, made by feminism during the 1970s and 80s (Taylor, 2007 p. 88), have been supplanted by a return to the naturalistic educational discourse of the late nineteenth century.

It is not surprising, given the responses in this study, that attracting males to primary education courses remains difficult. In order to address the decline in the number of males taking up a career in primary teaching Smith (2007) suggests that educationalists need to learn from the experiences of those males who currently work in the primary system. Stories of males who either work or are intending to work in the area are needed to inform an alternate discourse to the one that is currently perpetuated in education and society more generally: namely that caring primary teachers are surrogate mothers.

Conclusion

This study has generated an understanding of the effect certain gender discourses have on males' underrepresentation in primary education courses at university. Traditional perceptions of men's unsuitability for primary teaching continue to influence the number of men willing to take up the profession. This is a serious issue that needs to be addressed through more open debate in order to challenge the socially-conservative discourses that inform current school practices. This study agrees with Smith (2004) that reasons why men are suited to primary school teaching need to be better articulated. Furthermore ways must be found to ensure that those males already enrolled in primary teaching courses at university complete their studies and remain in the profession. Understanding the difficulties male primary teachers face is not enough. It is the responsibility of all within society to look at this issue from a pragmatic rather than traditional point of view and realize that men in fact can and do care.

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