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How do you teach like a man?

In 2012 I embarked on a research journey to discover what it is like to be a man in the teaching profession today. It is hard to pinpoint exactly where my interest in this research topic came from except for my readings of Michael Kimmel's (2008) book *Guyland: The Perilous World Where Boys Become Men*. Considering the buddy culture experiences of young American men today, identical to 'laddism' in Britain and Australia, Kimmel unmask a landscape devoid of the traditional signpost, signals and clues that had once marked out young men's journeys to manhood. In its place, Kimmel identifies a new social space called 'Guyland' where

young men are free from the responsibilities of adult life (partners, parents, jobs), yet are required to conform to its code in an intense and unforgiving manner. For the first time I realised that men do not have as much social power and confidence as I had come to expect. My thoughts led to my male colleagues who appear to hold positions of authority in schools because of their physicality coupled with the pre-eminence of the male teacher in Irish society. I was drawn to discover more about the most obvious staff member of a school, whose physical appearance marks one out as different in a predominantly feminine environment.

However, it was a certain social distance male teachers maintain with pupils and colleagues, in terms of care and staffroom interactions, that gave rise to a personal stimulus of inquiry. Two distinct but interconnected questions informally guided my reflections: What barriers do male teachers experience inside and outside the school? What is keeping men out of the teaching profession in Ireland?

Why were these male teachers willing to open up to a female?

Male teachers were invited to participate in this research by responding to an open call in the form of an article titled, 'Why

the decline in male primary school teachers?' which I placed in *InTouch* magazine (November 2014). Eleven male primary teachers expressed a desire to contribute to this research by way of interview. The following excerpts detail what three participants intended by their contribution to this research.

David: "Despite being relatively newly qualified I would estimate that I've been in approximately 20 different staffrooms as a teacher. On each occasion, as a male, I was in the minority. Taking part in the research appealed to me because it gave me the opportunity to reflect on the issue of gender imbalance in teaching. Previously, the skewed gender distribution of teachers was a matter that I accepted rather than questioned."

Dan: "I would be very happy to participate. It is applicable to me as I have taught in senior infants for the past two years, in two different schools, being the only male teacher on staff on each occasion."

Michael: "I have a specific interest in gender issues arising from a report issued by the Department of Education in 1994 called *Gender Equity – Action Research Report*. This challenged many stereotyping practices of the time and much of it is still relevant today. I feel that further studies such as this are needed and should be encouraged."

Working together and separately, the participants and I paved the way through the terrain of masculinities in Irish primary schools. The range of topics the participants addressed was broad: attention to conversations in the staffroom, caring for pupils, discipline, engaging with the school environment, family desires, peer perceptions, public perceptions, and interactions with colleagues. The following are two key themes raised during this study.

Perceptions of men working with children

Being a male is a potential source of simultaneous advantage and disadvantage for men who work with young children. The majority of teachers interviewed noted having a particularly positive effect on male pupils. They also noted the delight conveyed by parents to them, simply because they are men. The main reason given for the apparent gender advantage was the public's demand for male role models in the classroom. Yet, Michael believes that role modelling is not assigned to a specific gender in schools. He believes male and females model good practices but he

Perceptions of men working with children

believes they model different aspects of positive living.

Michael: "You are a role model in generosity; you are a role model of kindness. That doesn't have to be a male or female thing... a role model models different aspects of life."

Michael believes, however, that "there is some little thing missing when there isn't a male teacher, there is some male role model missing".

Dan's account illustrates the effect that the lack of having a male teacher can have on a young child, particularly if the child does not associate teaching as a male activity.

Dan: "One boy got so shocked by having a male teacher that he vomited, he vomited ...there were Coco-Pops everywhere. But I cared for that boy by cleaning up and calming him down and calling the mum and, ever since, he's just been so happy in school."

As noted by Skelton (2001), what kind of role models do we want to provide boys with and what are the implications for the hierarchy of primary schools if the numbers of male teachers are increased? Would we, in fact, be exacerbating the current images children have of predominately men in powerful positions? Most pupils in primary school will only come into contact with a male

teacher at the senior end of the school, if this is even a possibility.

Male teachers and care

The caring qualities needed for teaching are deemed to be natural, intuitive and inherently feminine. The teachers interviewed believe care is an important part of daily teaching interactions. However, when care is demonstrated by male teachers, the problematic relationship between male teachers and the concept of care emerges. David gives a clear example of this phenomenon as he recalls how he interacted with a child who fell on the ground during lunch time

Male teachers and care

David: "...this child fell and he was bawling his eyes out and I went over and I was trying to comfort him with words. Then the principal came over and gives him a big hug, she rubs him on the back and then he is beginning to get a bit better, and she walks away holding his hand... I couldn't do that though... I mean, it only takes one person to be suspicious."

Care in relation to male teachers is a concept that is often misinterpreted and surrounded with suspicion. Some teachers always teach with the classroom door open, others always keep the blinds open in the classroom, even on a sunny day or while watching a DVD. In fact, part of the construction of male teacher identities is an awareness of how others perceive male teachers and care.

Conclusion

This article aims to provide you with an insight into the lives of the male teachers in this study. The overall theme running through all interviews is summed up succinctly in five words by Dan, "It's a lonely profession overall." A study of gender, and especially male primary teachers, is essential if we are to tackle the question of teaching as a feminised profession.

Conclusion

References

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References

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