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HOW DO YOU TEACH LIKE A MAN? POLITICS AND PERCEPTIONS OF MEN WORKING WITH YOUNG CHILDREN

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ABSTRACT

The history of men has taught us that there has only been one form of 'man': dominant and powerful. The role of a man in society was once clear, coherent and secure. Today, being a man has become more complex and confusing. Considerable international research on gender engages with masculinities, masculinities in schools and men in non-traditional occupations. What is missing from the debate on masculinities is an account that connects the voices of men with their individual daily experiences. This paper details a four-year study of eleven male Irish primary school teachers, of which seven are included here, and evaluates the relationship between men, care and work. It examines diverse understandings of care, explores the public and private worlds of masculinities, and evaluates how various social relations are charged with formal and informal meanings of masculinities.

Keywords: care, education, gender, masculinities, work

INTRODUCTION

It is difficult to pinpoint exactly where to begin a study on masculinities, particularly as the question of masculinities encompasses biology, culture, history, society and philosophy. The elusiveness, fluidity and complex interconnectedness of masculinities in modern societies create many patterns that add to the complexity of researching and writing in this area (Haywood and Mac an Ghaill, 2003). There is no particular beginning to go back to: there are in fact multiple beginnings and multiple truths. Western culture's metanarratives about men – male ambition, competitiveness and selfishness as communicated through literature, popular culture and the social sciences – have traditionally emphasised men's power and authority. Western culture, at the beginning of the 20th century, presented an ideology that advanced the notion that men and women had different natures. In an attempt to make sense of the debates surrounding men and the subject of masculinities, men's aggression, power, sexualities, subjectivities and vulnerabilities have each been discussed and analysed at length (Collier, 1998). However, as Acker (1995) observes, the influence of gender in research has been minimal, noting that 'there is a small literature making problematic gender issues' for men who teach at primary level (Acker, 1995, p. 106, as cited in Skelton, 2001, p. 125). Male entry into a highly feminised occupation such as teaching renders it a difficult choice for many men. The main focus of this paper is to explore the everyday realities of masculinities for a selection of male teachers. It attempts to step into the minds of the participants, to explore and experience the world as they do themselves, and to investigate how each personal decision impacts on their personal and professional lives.

The men and their stories

I begin by introducing the male teachers whose stories are at the heart of this study. They are introduced in the order that I became acquainted with them. Many of the participants wrote their own introduction; when this was not possible, I wrote it for them. Each teacher also chose to use a pseudonym or to keep his own name. Through their words, we the readers are taken

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into the world of a male primary school teacher. The stories in this study may or may not be representative of the larger male teaching population. The stories of each teacher are unique to him, in what Silverman (2014) terms 'authentic accounts of subjective experience'. Each story is, however, united by a common desire to reconsider the common view of teaching as a female-dominated occupation. The following excerpts detail what seven participants intended by their contribution to this research.

David: Despite being relatively newly qualified, I would estimate that I've been in approximately twenty 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.

Darren: 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 Dept. 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.'

Tim: 'I am a 26-year-old teacher. The reason I took part in Suzanne's research was because I wanted to express my opinion on the level of masculinity in infant classes and its importance to children at such a young age.'

Matthew: 'I am a 31-year-old assistant principal and have been teaching for almost ten years. I work in a large urban school. Most of my career has been spent teaching in the younger classes. This research interested me because even though my school staff is almost 50% male, very few male teachers opt to teach the younger classes and equally few are assigned there. This has always puzzled me as I believe that male teachers have a lot to offer infant classes.'

Vincent: Vincent has been teaching for three years following a career as an engineer in the private sector. He changed career for lifestyle and family reasons. The main difference between engineering and teaching, Vincent revealed, was career motivation and progression. In engineering, 'You have somebody giving advice … you are being appraised and given encouragement … you are moving yourself up the chain all the time. Your boss is keeping an eye out on how you are progressing.' In his experience of teaching, 'It's nothing to do with did you roll up your sleeves and get the job done?'

Neil: 'I have been teaching for fifteen years in both rural and urban schools. Currently I am shared between three schools: one is an all-boys school, the other two are mixed-schools. In all cases it's overwhelmingly female, a predominantly female environment.'

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. This paper presents three key themes raised during this study: male teachers and care, perceptions of men working with young children and staffroom interactions.

POLITICS AND PERCEPTION: THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

'I don't really remember ever telling someone I am a teacher without someone going "Oh?" or the eyebrows going up.' As pointed out by Matthew, daily life is awash with gender politics (Kimmel, 2013). Indeed, daily teaching experiences illustrate acute examples of gender politics in the workforce. This is evident in many of the stories of those interviewed. Vincent recalled his first day as a substitute teacher in a school. A stray dog wandered into the school yard. As

he was the only male present in the school that day, he was asked to remove the animal from the school grounds. According to the male teachers in this study, such examples of sex role theory are widespread in primary schools. Vincent summarises that male teachers 'are sent to do whatever job men are supposed to do, lifting things … fixing things'. Furthermore, Darren states, 'All the time I am called in. If there's a ball that goes up on the roof, I have to get the ladder and get the ball down. Oh, the girls at the moment, they shout for me if there's a spider in the school or in their sink or …' Gender, in these cases, appears to make two jobs out of one (Hochschild, 2012). Similarly, David reminisces about the day a football fell into a stream that flowed next to the school. Again, being the only male teacher present, he was asked to 'go in with wellingtons and try and fish out the ball'. Although he did not mind helping out, he did question why he was asked to perform this task. 'I don't know why they thought I would be a good person to get the ball back.' In addition, Neil recalls the time there 'was a dead bird outside the school gate and I was asked to move it'. Equally, Neil did not understand why he was singled out to remove the bird, '…it could still be there for all I know because I didn't move it. I said, "No, why are you asking me to move it?" … I didn't hear of it anymore.'

The political ambiguities of masculinities and scientific knowledge stem from the question of what counts as knowledge. The first attempt to create a social science of masculinity centred on the idea of a male sex role (Connell, 1995). According to sex role theory, society comprises males and females, who provide different and complementary functions (Allan, 1994, p. 3). It has its origins in the work of Parsons (Parsons and Bales, 1953), who claimed that all societies need to fulfil the functions of production and reproduction. Although sex role theory informed the early men's movement of the 1970s, it has numerous shortcomings. A number of critics have pointed out that by focusing on one normative standard of masculinity that is white, middle class and heterosexual, sex role theory is 'unable to account for diversity and difference in men's lives' (Pease, 2007, p. 555). Additionally, it under-emphasises male economic and political power and their 'resistance to change' (Pease, 2007). Sex role theory has now 'become obsolete, rejected for its ethnocentrism, lack of power perspective, and incipient positivism' (Kimmel, 1987 as cited in Kimmel, Hearn and Connell, 2005, p. 5). It is clear that the sex role model does not work. However, Connell (2000) states, it is not very clear 'what way of thinking about the making of gender should take place'.

Recently, the concept of hegemonic masculinity has strongly influenced current thinking about men, gender and social hierarchy (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). Hegemonic masculinity can be defined as 'an aggressively heterosexual masculinity' (Connell, 1987, p. 120) or the modes of masculinities that claim the 'highest status and exercise the greatest influence and authority' (Skelton, 2001, p. 50). That is to say, the hegemony is both dominant and dominating. Hegemonic masculinity was a regular pattern in the stories told by participants: male teachers are more likely to have responsibility for senior classes, occupy decision-making roles such as Principal or Assistant Principal, and generally maintain discipline throughout the school. Hegemonic masculinity, the form of dominant masculinity prevailing in a school, is used to explain behaviours *among* male teachers. Connell (1995) maintains that to recognise diversity within a setting is not enough. We must also 'recognize the *relations* between the different kinds of masculinity' (Connell, 1995, p. 37, italics in original). In order to achieve this, we must consider the gender regime of the school. In other words, we must identify the pattern of practices that construct various kinds of masculinities among staff and students, such as the surveillance of 'appropriate' gender behaviours and the marginalisation of others.

FINDINGS

Theme 1: 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 when recalling how he interacted with a child who had fallen on the ground during lunch time.

David: '… this child fell and he was balling 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. If somebody saw, if somebody was looking over the wall and saw me holding a child's hand and hugging them it would look weird … I mean, it only takes one person to be suspicious.'

As King (1998) notes, 'hugging and touch are risky behaviours for men who work with children' (p. 66). David's description of the child who fell and his inability to engage with strategies of care, such as hugging and touching, exemplify the risk of such behaviour. David is clearly aware that young children need affection and warmth from him as a teacher. However, he also keenly notes that the very same incident created an opportunity for a female colleague to demonstrate care and emotional connection. 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. All teachers demonstrate their sensitivity to pupils through words rather than action. In fact, part of the construction of male teacher identities is an awareness of how others perceive male teachers and care (King, 1998).

Theme 2: 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 that they had a particularly positive effect on male pupils. They also noted the delight conveyed by parents in response 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 maintains that role modelling is not assigned to a specific gender in schools. He believes males and females both model good practices but he also asserts that 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.'

Darren: Darren'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 see teaching as a male activity. '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.'

The perception of men working with children raises many questions, several of which have been posed by Skelton (2001). What kind of role models do we want to provide boys with? What are the implications for the hierarchy of primary schools if the numbers of male teachers are increased? Would we, in fact, be reinforcing the current images children have of men occupying 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.

Theme 3: Staffroom interactions

Interview findings reveal that male teachers can find the staffroom an intimidating and lonely room to be in. Male teachers may become 'fed up' with socialising in a female milieu such as the staffroom. As Darren notes, 'It's just trying to pass half an hour really.' This difficulty is explained in part by the topics of conversation in the staffroom.

Michael: 'Conversation is usually about jewellery, clothes … children … there is zero concession to what I would like to talk about, you know? Being a male in that situation is a lonely experience.'

David: David echoes this sentiment of loneliness. 'Sometimes you go through lunch times without saying anything.'

Darren: Similarly, Darren describes the staffroom as 'quite isolating at times', a place where 'you can either be very much on your own or you can be very much the centre of attention.'

Tim: Tim agrees that the topics of staffroom conversation are quite limited. However, the most difficult situations encountered in the staffroom are as a result of uncomfortable interactions with other male teachers, particularly male teachers of senior classes. 'Nothing against the other male teachers, it's just that they do give off the vibe of machismo and big bravado and they wouldn't talk about every single interest in the world. They would have their one specific topic and if you are not part of that loop … they won't talk to you.'

Haywood and Mac an Ghaill (2013) state that men occupy a hegemonic masculinity 'or assert a position of superiority' by 'winning the consent of other males … in order to secure their (hegemonic) legitimacy'. Furthermore, Bradley (2013) claims, even in situations of warmth and companionship, 'embodied masculinity remains on display'. Tim understands male teachers' unwillingness to broaden the topics of conversation as a fear of portraying too much femininity: 'You can't give off any viable femininity in your personality or your character or else you would have to assert your masculinity.' Similarly, Bradley (2013) notes that where friendship groups are heterosexual, wariness remains about possible misinterpretations of emotionality. Through the manipulation of gendered power relationships at micro-political level, the traditional model of male dominance is turned on its head.

Tim: 'I can see it in them, that they would have to portray "I am the man. I am a man here in this job. I do what men do … I will talk like a man, I will walk like a man, I will teach like a man" … I don't get that. We are all teaching the very same way.'

The school should be viewed not only for its teaching but also its atmosphere as a workplace.

DISCUSSION

Men and Care

Being a teacher means being able to establish human relations with the people being taught (Connell, 1993). Care, when considered as a performative act, reproduces male teachers' subjectivities in the workplace. This is because caring and emotional attributes do not correspond with workplace perceptions of masculinities. Caring can be defined in a number of varied ways but this study takes Noddings' (1992) definition of care as relational, not as a virtue or an individual attribute. 'A caring relation is … a connection or encounter between two human beings – a carer and a recipient of care' (ibid, p. 17). It is a way of being in relation, not a set of specific behaviours. However, when men exhibit caring attributes at work, they are not considered compatible with dominant definitions of masculinities. Indeed, motherly or caring qualities are not deemed appropriate to the male domain of management or authority. Furthermore, a caring approach to education may suggest an anti-intellectual approach. Sustaining beliefs about men and masculinities can be read in relation to the 'global subordination of women to men' (Connell, 1987, p. 183). Within this framework, which

connects masculinities to wider social and economic forces, caring is associated with 'subservience' (Noddings, 2006, p. 228), a point reflected by King (1998), who notes its 'subordinated status'. Holding on to the 'centrality of women's oppression' in a study of masculinities has 'generated some of the most exciting work on men and masculinity' (Haywood and Mac an Ghaill, 2003, p. 9). With this in mind, understandings of masculinities impact on what is considered as work. Alvesson and Billing (1997) contend that gendered work is 'deeper than sex typing, meaning that not only is a job openly viewed as women's or men's work, but that it refers also to non-explicit meanings, unconscious fantasies and associations'. In other words, what men do is synonymous with what men are. The gender of care is considered female (King, 1998). This is because, as noted by Noddings (2006), care and caregiving are treated as the same. The dual nature of care, the technical concept involving attention and response and hands-on caregiving, may help to explain the ambiguity of care in education. Caregiving has long been the domain of women and 'the ethics of care seems to have its origin in female experience' (Noddings, 2006, p. 229).

Men and Work

Starting work has traditionally been understood as an important moment in the passage from boyhood to adulthood. Historically, work stood as the most fundamental foundation of masculine identity. Haywood and Mac an Ghaill (2003) note that men have often been understood though the idea of being a worker, 'with which they have closely identified and invested'. Indeed, an assumption about the relationship between masculinities and men rests, for many, between 'a particular correlation … between men and work' (Collier, 1998, p. 74). Connections between masculinities and work are reflected in various social processes and social structures (Evans, 2003; Haywood and Mac an Ghaill, 2003). Social processes involve the interconnection of becoming a worker with becoming a man. Work, alongside marriage, facilitates an otherwise problematic transition from youth to male adulthood. For those working within the sex-role paradigm, work not only matters to men, it is part *of* them (Edwards, 2006). With this understanding, an important passage is made from the private family sphere to the public sphere that is characterised by a shift in values from 'dependence to independence' (p. 22).

Matthew: Matthew alludes to such values: '… men have to rule the world and they have to be in charge…'

Neil: Similarly, Neil alludes to the link between work and masculinities: 'It is not a very masculine job to admit to, "I'm a primary school teacher" versus you're a plumber, you know what I mean? You are good at doing things we expect men to be good at doing … laying pipes … fixing blockages or you are a brick-layer or you're a cabinet maker. We expect men to be good at those things. "You are a teacher. What do you do?" "I teach, I write. I do long-term plans…" Like, how manly is that?'

Public and Private Masculinities

A key aspect of male teachers' identity is the performance of a public masculinity. Entering teaching as a profession means entering a profession that is built upon complex cultural and social networks. This network is constituted by factors including attitudes towards caring, gender-coded behaviour and the gender division of labour in emotion (King, 1998). The social aspects of care locate it within the personal or private realm. Furthermore, economic aspects relegate care to the status of unpaid labour (Noddings, 2006). However, when male teachers enact caring behaviour it disrupts the subordinate status of care. When the boundaries of public (the workplace) and private (care) become blurred, male teachers adopt alternative resources to validate their masculine identities. Care may manifest in caring-*for* and caring-*about* (King, 1998). Engaging in caring-*for* behaviour involves listening, speaking softly, touching, hugging and providing space. Women, in general, have been expected to care in this manner, 'that is, to

provide tender, hands-on caregiving' (Noddings, 2006, p. 229). These acts may seem 'unnatural' when enacted by male teachers. Male teachers may distance themselves from these behaviours and only care-*about* pupils (King, 1998, p. 126). In other words, male teachers will represent their students, encourage and discuss them with others but overall they will appear not to care. King (1998) also notes that it is '…striking that the options for care are identical for men and women, but the choices are weighed differently based on gender' (p. 126). Also evident is the manner in which male teachers reinforce existing stereotypes, with hardness and toughness, rather than challenging them.

CONCLUSION

This paper aimed to provide the reader 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 from Darren: '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. The construction of teaching as a gender-inscribed social performance generates both concern for male teachers and also encourages gender conformity as the nature of interactions within the school comes under scrutiny. Men who do not align themselves with dominant hegemonic masculinities are believed to have adopted traditionally ascribed feminine values, such as emotionality, intimacy and sentimentality. Such stereotypes, Kimmel (2013) suggests, coupled with low occupational prestige and low pay, not only discourage men from entering the teaching profession but also ensure that teaching becomes more densely populated by female teachers.

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