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Attracting, recruiting and retaining male teachers: policy issues in the male teacher debate

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Frequent calls for more male teachers are being made in English-speaking countries. Many of these calls are based upon the fact that the teaching profession has become (even more) 'feminized' and the presumption that this has had negative effects for the education of boys. The employment of more male teachers is sometimes suggested as a way to re-masculinize schools so they become more 'boy-friendly' and thus contribute to improving boys' school performance. The focus of this paper is on an Australian education policy document in the state of Queensland that is concerned with the attraction, recruitment and retention of male teachers in the government education system. It considers the failure of this document, as with many of the calls for more male teachers, to take into account complex matters of gender raised by feminism and the sociology of masculinities. The paper then critiques the primary argument given for the need for more male teachers: that is, that male teachers provide boys with much needed role models.

Introduction

Calls for more male teachers are reverberating around education systems in English-speaking countries. Such calls can be found in policy documents (Teacher Training Agency, 1999; Canadian Teachers' Federation, 2002; Education Queensland, 2002), government reports (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Training, 2002), popular texts on boys (Biddulph, 1997; Gurian, 1999; Kindler & Thompson, 1999; Pollack, 1999), and articles and letters in newspapers (Spowart, 1999; Cole, 2002; Sacks, 2002). Various reasons are given for why there need to be more males in teaching. However, the majority of the arguments for more male teachers stress that the teaching profession has become increasingly 'feminized' and thus the education of boys has suffered because of the resultant lack of male role models.

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There are two sections to this paper. The first provides an analysis of the strategies recommended in a new strategic plan in Queensland, Australia, the *Male Teachers' Strategy* (Education Queensland, 2002), to attract, recruit and retain male teachers. This policy is significant as it is the first public policy document on this issue in Australia at a time when educational systems throughout Australia and in other English-speaking countries are canvassing the need for similar policies.

In the second section of the paper, we critique one central argument within this policy document; that is, that boys in schools need to be provided with male role models. In so doing, we argue that the dominant constructions of masculinity implied within calls for more male role models for boys potentially denigrate the work being done in schools by female teachers, and may be harmful to girls in schools and to gender relations in general. Our arguments in this section are supported with data collected during a national study of boys' education in Australia funded by the federal government (Lingard *et al.*, 2002). While critiquing one particular policy on male teachers, our position is that men should take greater responsibility in caring and teaching children and young people across the schooling cycle.

Education Queensland's *Male Teachers' Strategy*: attraction, recruitment and retention of male teachers

The *Male Teachers' Strategy* (2002–2005) is a four-page policy document produced by Education Queensland, the State Department of Education, and to be applied in the government school sector. This specific policy is constructed by the Department as one element of its broader policy on 'an inclusive work environment' (Education Queensland, 2002, p. 1). The Strategy is framed around a series of questions to which the policy provides answers. In this way and as with the policy genre generally, the problem is constructed by the document, and in a self-referential fashion the solution is provided to the problem (Yeatman, 1990; Taylor *et al.*, 1997). It is these dual policy processes of problem construction and problem solution that this section of the paper critiques.

The document notes that Queensland has a male teaching population of approximately 28%, and that this number is decreasing. It also notes that the number of males applying to teacher education degrees in the state is also in decline. A number of problems are argued to flow from this; namely, the lack of male role models for male students, which the policy suggests is a negative for male students, potentially affecting their commitment to academic achievement and to schooling in general. It is this common argument in the male teacher debate that is critiqued in the second section of this paper.

The *Male Teachers' Strategy*, in its second paragraph, provides a rationale for why Education Queensland is attempting to increase the numbers of male teachers in government schools:

> Education Queensland is committed to providing students with diverse learning experiences. To achieve this, we recognise that it is necessary to create and sustain a diverse workforce that reflects the student population and the community we serve. This

> strategy has been developed to assist Education Queensland to create a diverse workforce by increasing the number of males engaged in the delivery of educational services. (Education Queensland, 2002, p. 1)

However, while Education Queensland's *Male Teachers' Strategy* states that there is a need for more male teachers to promote diversity within the system, it does not advocate for the recruitment of more gay male teachers, nor is there any mention of indigenous male teachers. There is a very restrictive notion of diversity being deployed here—diversity refers to gender alone. This becomes quite apparent when examining the 'performance indicators' of the strategy.

The Strategy states that it will have made a 'real difference' when Education Queensland has (Education Queensland 2002, p. 2):

- increased the numbers of males applying for teaching positions;
- enhanced employer of choice status for males wishing to enter teaching as a career;
- increased the representation of male teachers;
- increased the job satisfaction level of male teachers working for Education Queensland; and
- improved working conditions and established a culture that values and acknowledges the needs of male teachers.

These indicators beg a number of questions. For instance, there is a significant body of research that has demonstrated that some male teachers are abusive to students, collude with boys against girls and/or abuse female teachers and male teachers not performing hegemonic forms of masculinity (Mahony, 1985; Bailey, 1996; Mills, 1996; Datnow, 1998; Ferfolja, 1998; Roulston & Mills, 2000). Should a system be seeking, for example, to increase the numbers of such men applying to be teachers, increasing their job satisfaction levels or valuing and acknowledging their needs? It is unfortunate that in the Strategy there is little mention of the qualities expected of male teachers, nor, as King (2000, p. 3) notes, of the 'troubled' 'relationships between the socially constructed categories of ''men'' and ''teacher''''. These are critical issues in understanding both the attraction (or lack thereof) of males to teaching and their performances within it (see Skelton, 2001, p. 125).

A consideration of these issues is missing from the *Male Teachers' Strategy*. For instance, its suggested strategies to support the 'attraction, recruitment and retention' of male teachers include the following (Education Queensland, 2002, pp. 3–4):

- Encourage male teachers to promote the teaching profession at school and university career fairs.
- Establish a secondary school-based program for existing male teachers to mentor male students wishing to become teachers.
- Develop a targeted scholarship program for tertiary teaching courses aimed at:

— Year 10 students;
— Year 12 leaving males;
— males currently enrolled in another tertiary course of study; and
— males already possessing an undergraduate degree in an area other than teaching.

- Establish a career management and succession planning process for teacher aspirants.
- Develop mechanisms to support teachers who are being investigated as a result of student complaints and link strategies to existing mechanisms in the *Child Protection Act 1999*.

These strategies are highly problematic because of their silence on issues of gender, despite the gendered implications of each strategy. An analysis of each of these strategies will serve to demonstrate some of the ways in which gender as an 'absent presence' has worrying consequences for existing gender relations in schools.

The Strategy suggests one of the reasons why there are so few male teachers is the status of the teaching profession. The first two of the aforementioned strategies are linked into improving this status by working to construct it as a 'masculine' activity. This is designed to counter the construction of teaching as a feminized profession. Currently, teaching, especially in the early years, is regularly associated with essentialized attributes of feminized activity such as 'care' (King, 1998; 2000; see also Noddings, 1984). Very few of the attempts to attract men to teaching emphasize these attributes as being part of good pedagogy. Instead, as with the pre-service teachers in Skelton's (2002) UK study, it is regularly argued that to increase the involvement of men in teaching, and in particular primary education, the status of the profession needs to be improved through higher pay levels and by schools developing a more 'masculine'—'male friendly'—environment. On the latter, the Strategy argues the need to 'ensure that our workplaces are welcoming and inclusive' (Education Queensland, 2002, p. 1) for male secondary school leavers and for existing male teachers.

The attempt to create schools as being more 'welcoming and inclusive' for male teachers—'male friendly'—implies that they are not currently so. Such implications are often at the heart of criticisms of schools as 'feminized' institutions. Such critiques are usually constructed within a backlash framework that implies that there has been a feminist conspiracy against boys, and male teachers, in schools (see Lingard & Douglas, 1999; Skelton, 2002; Mills, 2003). However, this use of 'feminized' seldom recognizes that the 'feminization' of teaching has worked against women teachers in salary and career terms (for a critique of the use of 'feminization' in education, see Skelton, 2002).

Like many other so-called feminized occupations, such as nursing, the salaries are lower and the upper echelons of the profession are filled by men (see Williams, 1993; Allan, 1993; Owen, 1999). As King (2000) has argued, maintaining this exploitative set of gender relations means keeping men out of the ranks. To some extent this has been facilitated by constructing men who want to enter teaching as wanting to be like women, and thus as 'abnormal' men. This is less so in relation to high school teaching within the masculinized domains, such as science, mathematics, manual arts and physical education, but particularly so in relation to teaching in the early years of school. In some instances, this 'abnormality' is constructed as being gay or, and often interrelated, with having paedophilic intentions (see Berrill & Martino, 2002).

These silences within the Strategy are unfortunate because understanding the ways in which homophobia, femiphobia and misogyny impact upon the recruitment and retention of male teachers is important in any attempt to attract more male teachers. For as Skelton (2001, p. 148) has stated, 'the significance of a heterosexual identity is of particular significance for male primary teachers'. This is also borne out in the research conducted by Jim King in the United States. King's (2000) interviews with male primary school teachers shows how some men are so concerned about being perceived to be gay because they work with young children that they develop strategies to disprove such suggestions (see also Berrill & Martino, 2002). These include, for instance, putting pictures of their wives and children on their desks (King, 2000) or wearing wedding rings (Sumsion, 1999).

Ironically, rather than seeking to challenge the ways in which the feminized attributes associated with teaching have been devalued, and addressing the consequences of this for women in the teaching profession, adopting processes such as scholarships for men serves to construct men as disadvantaged by the system and thus deserving of 'affirmative action' policies. This particular approach is consistent with the use of other social justice concepts, such as diversity, throughout this document, without recognizing the privileged position from which men operate within the existing gender order. This shows a lack of understanding of these very concepts or at least of how elastic their usage can be.

One of the suggested strategies in the Education Queensland document involves developing ways to ensure that men entering the teaching profession have some sense of career trajectory. However, as one female teacher recently commented in interviews in a government-funded research project (Lingard *et al.*, 2002), 'lack of promotional opportunities shouldn't deter men from teaching, they are usually promoted within five minutes of becoming a teacher' (see also Murray, 1996; Sumsion, 1999). As Skelton (2002, p. 85) notes in relation to data from the Department for Education and Skills in the United Kingdom, one in four male primary teachers is likely to become a head teacher, compared with one in 13 female primary teachers. The speed with which men in 'feminized' professions tend to be promoted has sometimes been referred to as the 'glass escalator' (Williams, 1992).

However, the 'glass escalator' does not appear to be incentive enough to attract a lot of men into teaching, particularly primary school teaching. One of the common reasons given for this, including within the *Male Teachers' Strategy*, is that many men have a fear of false paedophilia accusations. The response of Education Queensland is to suggest setting up a support framework for teachers who are accused of sexual misconduct. While false claims of sexual abuse are devastating to those accused, there is little in this strategy that will help to develop challenging attitudes to the creation of this fear. The fear is most pervasive when men move in to non-masculinized areas of the curriculum and/or schooling sector. For example, when men move into early childhood their motives are often questioned (King, 2000, p. 9; see also Murray, 1996; Smedley, 1998; Sumsion, 1999). Such work is constructed within patriarchal societies as women's work and is devalued. The consequence of this is that men who want

to teach young children risk being positioned as deviant, abnormal or lacking. That is, they are at risk of being seen as gay, 'effeminate' or a paedophile.

The risk that men pose to children in early childcare, and other educational settings, however, is an important topic that should not be trivialized (see Skelton, 1994; Cameron *et al.*, 1999, chapter 7). There has been a significant amount of feminist political work carried out to get the issue of child sexual abuse on to the political agenda (see, for example, Kelly, 1988; Scutt, 1990; Segal, 1990). This work has seen the development of a number of institutions and legislation designed to protect children—in Queensland the *Child Protection Act 1999* is one such law. It would be unfortunate if much of this work was undone in an attempt to attract more male teachers into the system. Rather, what is needed is not so much greater protection for men accused of sexual abuse of students, but rather a more thoughtful response. This would acknowledge that particular men, practising specific masculinities, do pose a risk to children (Cameron *et al.*, 1999), and indeed to women, to each other and often to themselves. Such an acknowledgment would recognize that underpinning attempts to attract, recruit and retain male teachers ought to be considerations of multiple masculinities and considerations of what types of men are wanted in teaching.

In short, there is little in the Strategy that justifies increasing the number of male teachers apart from the need to have a teaching force that is reflective of a diverse society and to provide boys with role models. It is usually the second reason that underpins many of the calls for more male teachers in the public media. We therefore want to explore further this dominant notion that boys need male role models in schools.

Male role models for boys

The putative connection between the need for more male role models and the improvement of boys' educational experiences is widespread. For instance, in an article in *The Los Angeles Times*, a prominent teacher who has apparently been named in 'Who's Who Among America's Teachers' twice writes:

> … boys in particular need strong, charismatic teachers who mix firm discipline with a good-natured acceptance of boyish energy. Concomitantly, a sharp increase in the number of male teachers is also needed, particularly at the elementary level, where female teachers outnumber male teachers six to one. (Sacks, 2002)

And, in their popular book on boys, *Raising Cain: protecting the emotional life of boys*, Kindler and Thompson (1999) argue that:

> Boys benefit from the presence of male teachers and authority figures as role models of academic scholarship, professional commitment, moral as well as athletic leadership, and emotional literacy. The presence of men can have a tremendously calming effect on boys. (p. 50)

The logic employed in these comments has a number of consequences. First, the suggestion that boys need male authority figures, and that concomitant with the need

for charismatic teachers is a need to increase the number of male teachers, treats female teachers as deficit, in that there is a supposition that they are not currently up to the job of teaching boys. Thus, as Smedley (1998) has argued, within much of current gender debates, women are seen as the problem and men as the solution. Second, the assumption that male teachers are better able to 'discipline' unruly boys reinforces the dominant images of masculinities that are often at the heart of the problem of many issues in boys' education (Epstein *et al.*, 1998; Martino & Meyenn, 2001; Mills, 2001; Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2003). Third, the assumption that male teachers are more likely to accept or tolerate 'boyish energy' also points to potential complicities between boys and male teachers in relation to boys' gendered performances (Roulston & Mills, 2000; see also Datnow, 1998; Francis, 2000; Skelton, 2001). Fourth, the notion of boyish energy also conjures up images of essentialized masculine behaviours, typified by the 'boys will be boys' approach to boys' behaviours, and that schools should value such behaviours. The suggestion that 'normal' boy-behaviours are not valued in school is often associated with the backlash perception of schools as feminized institutions that are not 'boy friendly'. We will deal with each of these assumptions in turn.

The majority of calls for more male teachers are driven by a culture of blame that attributes boys' lack of success in schools, *inter alia*, to feminized curricula, assessment regimes and teaching methods, and to female teachers (Smedley, 1998). The culture of misogynist blame that, in our view, is shaping much of the male teacher debate, draws upon many of the discourses evident in those conservative politics that blame single mothers for not rearing their sons in appropriate ways (see, for example, Blankenhorn, 1995; Edlund, 2001; Arndt, 2003; Slattery, 2003). The nuclear family is valourized by the suggestion that boys who do not have fathers in their lives are likely to be experiencing a deficient upbringing. This deficiency is indicated by utilizing arguments that suggest boys are currently underachieving at school. The legitimacy of these claims has been widely disputed and the need to nuance performance data by taking into account issues of class, ethnicity and race to consider which boys and which girls are being advantaged or disadvantaged within the current system of schooling are now widely accepted (Epstein *et al.*, 1998; Lingard & Douglas 1999; Collins *et al.*, 2000; Francis, 2000; Skelton, 2001). However, there is still a dominant perception that all boys are under-performing at school in relation to all girls. Indeed, a recent parliamentary inquiry into boys' education in Australia was critical of academic and educational bureaucrats who did not take this need for nuanced data seriously (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Training, 2002), but this inquiry also argued that a focus on the 'which girls and which boys?' approach had been used by academics and policy-makers to deflect attention from an educational policy concern with boys *per se*. We do not want to engage with this debate in any detailed way here (for further analysis, see Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998; Arnot *et al.*, 1999; Lingard & Douglas, 1999; Collins *et al.*, 2000; Francis, 2000; Skelton, 2001; 2002), but it needs to be stressed that blaming female teachers for boys' underachievement negates the ways in which dominant constructions of masculinity inhibit some male students' learning (Mahony, 1998; Lingard *et al.*, 2002).

However, achievement is not the only concern of those advocating for male teachers to be teaching boys. There is a way in which there is an engagement with mythopoetic, or what Lingard and Douglas (1999) refer to as 'recuperative', masculinity politics (see also Lingard *et al.*, 2002). The mythopoets are just one arm of recuperative masculinity politics who want to return to the supposedly 'golden time' before feminism. They usually draw on assumptions about a natural or essentialized masculinity, which needs to be spiritually nurtured from boyhood to manhood by a father figure (see Bly, 1991; Biddulph, 1995; 1997; Gurian, 1999; Pollack, 1999). This mythopoetic literature often constructs men and boys as lost souls who are on the verge of becoming depressed, suicidal and violent offenders. Pollack (1999, p. xxi) provides a good example of this view:

> Boys today are in serious trouble, including many who seem 'normal' and to be doing just fine. Confused by society's mixed messages about what's expected of them as boys, and later as men, many feel a sadness and disconnection they cannot even name.

It is often mythopoetic literature and arguments such as the aforementioned that are drawn upon by male teachers, and those in schools, who are attempting to address issues in boys' education. In Australia, the popular psychologist, Steve Biddulph, is perhaps the most well known proponent of mythopoetic politics. His books, *Manhood: an action plan for changing men's lives* (Biddulph, 1995) and *Raising boys* (Biddulph, 1997) have both been bestsellers in Australia and have also helped to shape the men's agenda in other English-speaking countries. His work has been widely criticised for its anti-feminist politics (see, for example, Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998; Lingard & Douglas, 1999; Mills, 2003). However, it has been popular with many concerned about boys' education. For instance, in a research project that we conducted for the Australian Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST) (see Lingard *et al.*, 2002)[1], a male teacher in a small co-educational primary school, drawing on a lower middle socio-economic status population of a major city, stressing the importance of male teachers in boys' lives, drew heavily upon the mythopoetic and essentialist discourses found within Biddulph's work:

> Steve Biddulph tells a great story about how his little boy puts his armour on when he gets closer to school. 500m from school he turns out from being this loving honest caring kid to this tough straight strong child who goes and walks into the corridor like this. One of the things with boys' education I think you need to teach boys how to connect with their emotions.

The teacher uses this Biddulph-type language to establish certain truth claims about the need for boys to experience pedagogies that value their 'maleness', something that does not happen in supposedly 'boy-unfriendly' schools. This valuing of maleness is supported by getting behind the mask that all boys supposedly wear to hide their true selves. The underlying reasons why some boys might feel the need to wear such masks are not considered. For instance, there is no mention of the homophobia or misogyny that leaves many boys in terror of being labelled as a 'gay' or a 'girl' if they express their emotions openly.

This same teacher, in stressing the need for boys to have male mentors, drew on his

experiences as a boy with male teachers at his school. These male teachers appeared to function as surrogate fathers in the support they provided him. He talked about each of them:

> Mack, my manual arts teacher. I didn't have a dad because he died when I was very young and this guy said, 'You don't talk about girls like that. That's not what you say, if you want to talk to a girl this is how you do it'. So I had a mentor in him. And X my phys ed teacher and next door neighbour … Mr. W in Grade 4 gave me a lift home and said, 'How is your reading going?' … So all my life was made up with these, not all males but lots of them and that was really important to me to have a male because I didn't have a dad at home.

The theme of the missing father is a common one in the mythopoetic literature (Blankenhorn, 1995; for critiques of such literature, see Kimmel, 1995; Mills & Lingard, 1997; Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998; Mills, 2003). For many mythopoets, the pressures confronting boys could be avoided if there were men involved in their upbringing. They thus lament the fact that so many boys are currently being brought up in single-mother households. In the light of that absence, it is suggested that male teachers can become influential father-like figures for boys. This sentiment was reflected in some of the comments made by the early childhood teachers, men and women, in Murray's (1996) US case study research of male and female child care workers in two child care centres, many of whom utilized the discourse of male teachers being replacement fathers. The importance placed on fathers in many advocates for boys' education is evident in some schools' programmes of fathers reading to sons and 'dads and lads' evenings that have been organized in order to bring fathers into childrens', or more specifically sons', lives. A key role that such father figures are often expected to play is the disciplining of their children.

The idea that students will be uncontrollable without a firm male hand implies that the most effective forms of child rearing involve displays of hegemonic masculinity, a stance that clearly valourizes particular forms of masculine domination (Francis & Skelton, 2001). Within this valourization of male teachers and their supposed 'natural' disciplining skills, there is again a deficit model of female teachers implied. This works to reinforce patriarchal relations of power and indeed to normalize traditional nuclear families in that some schools' usage of male teachers to discipline students is analogous with notions of 'Wait until your dad gets home!' (King, 2000, p. 13). There is also a way in which male teachers can use this disciplining role to emphasize their masculinity and to distance themselves from being constructed as feminine.

None of this is to deny that some boys and some girls may learn better from some male teachers. However, what are important here are the particular forms of masculinity and quality of pedagogies practised in the classroom. It is not simply a question of the teacher's gender (Lingard *et al.*, 2002). This same set of observations applies to female teachers as well. We also need to acknowledge that classroom discipline is not simply a function of the gender of the teacher. None of these matters is dealt with adequately in the *Male Teacher's Strategy*.

In the previous section, the troubled connection between dominant constructions

of masculinity and the gendered construction of 'teaching' was identified. One of the consequences of this 'troubled' state of affairs is that male teachers often enact forms of 'behaviour management' that emphasize their construction of 'normal' masculinities. As Francis and Skelton state:

> Many students, teachers and parents see men as being 'natural' disciplinarians. And many male teachers may seek to perpetuate this construction of themselves in order to better achieve a construction of 'hard' masculinity'. (2001, p. 13)

In order to demonstrate their 'manliness' some male teachers use gendered discourses or put-downs to male students in ways to control them (Mills, 1996; Roulston & Mills, 2000; Francis & Skelton, 2001). Thus, as Francis and Skelton (2001, p. 12), drawing on Connell (1985), argue, male teachers often 'emphasise those aspects of teaching that are more compatible with conventional masculinity'. As a consequence, in primary schools it is male teachers who often teach the older pupils, coach the football teams, are involved in managerial roles and discipline and act as mentors for students considered to be behaviour problems.

While the calls for male teachers utilize a 'men as disciplinarians' discourse that denies women's 'behaviour management' and pedagogical skills, there is some evidence that male students are likely to misbehave more for female teachers. For instance, in the DEST study some of the female staff at a small rural high school expressed their concerns about boys' behaviours. Some described themselves as 'victims' of some boys' behavioural problems. Observations conducted at this school indicated that male students did indeed tend to be more disruptive with female teachers. Such behaviours by boys towards female teachers have been documented in other research (Jones, 1985; Askew & Ross, 1988; Walkerdine, 1989). These boys' behaviours towards these teachers need to be addressed in ways that do not denigrate female teachers by suggesting that they are not as capable of teaching boys as men (see Bailey, 1996). An approach to boys' problem behaviours in relation to female teachers thus needs to be cast within a framework that explores the relations of gender and power operating between the teacher and the students. This will often entail requiring boys to consider the influence of gender concepts, and more specifically their understanding of masculinity, on their attitudes and behaviour. Such an approach is seldom taken up by male teachers (Roulston & Mills, 2000; Mills, 2001; Skelton, 2001).

While in some instances the focus on male teachers' supposed ability to control students does refer to all students, it is most often used in the context of controlling just boys. This is problematic for gender relations, as it works to construct boys as active, rebellious and boisterous, while constructing girls as passive, biddable and quiet. This lack of concern for girls' behaviours is perhaps not unexpected. While those advocating for more male role models usually lament men's lack of involvement in the lives of their sons, daughters rarely warrant a mention. There is very little talk within mythopoetic literature of men taking responsibility for child rearing *per se*; rather, it is of men needing to take responsibility for turning their sons into 'fine young men'. These men's politics, despite what some may think of such literature, are not

about constructing new masculinities, but about shoring up the hegemony of traditional masculinities. Indeed, it has been shown in a range of research that when men take responsibility for teaching boys, especially in non-traditional areas of the curriculum and in homo-social situations, that they often collude with boys to maintain existing gendered relations of power (see Connolly, 1998; Martino, 1999; Roulston & Mills, 2000; Skelton, 2001).

Conclusion

This paper has focused on a policy attempt to attract, recruit and retain male teachers within one education system and upon the stated motives for such a policy. We have been critical of the strategies outlined in this policy and of the supposed necessity for implementing them: that is, to provide boys with male role models. Our criticisms have been based upon the silences in the male teacher debate that have served to shore up the privileges of men and boys at the expense of female teachers and girls, and that fail to address issues of hierarchical gendered power relationships. These relate to lack of recognition of the ways in which homophobia, femiphobia and misogyny underpin gender relations in schools. We have argued that such discourses have served to construct the teaching profession, especially in the early years and some curriculum areas, as a 'feminized' occupation. This construction has served to devalue the status of teaching by constructing such work for women as being a 'natural' feminine activity. It has also, and concomitantly, worked to police the entry of men into certain areas of the profession—namely the early years of schooling, and other supposedly 'feminine' areas of the curriculum—and to construct men who do become such teachers as 'abnormal', which is often read as being gay or a (potential) paedophile.

Some men have of course resisted such pressures and have developed a variety of strategies to confront such allegations. Many of these strategies have worked to reinforce the hegemony of traditional forms of masculine performance. The allure of the 'glass escalator' has also compensated for some of the stresses that such men may face. Many of the backlash strategies for encouraging more males into teaching are unlikely to either construct a re-culturing of the school environment that enables men to perform non-traditional masculinities or to slow down the escalation of men out of the classroom into management. We are concerned that such strategies do not recognize the complex nature of gender relations in schools or the ways in which the negative perception of men entering teaching does not disadvantage men as a group, but does reinforce their privilege.

In challenging the idea that there is a need for more male role models in schools, we have raised concerns about the ways in which some male teachers denigrate the work of female teachers and sometimes collude with boys to reinforce the current gender order, along with the gender regime of the school. However, we do not argue that all male teachers do this; nor are we opposed to there being more male teachers in schools, especially in non-traditional curriculum areas and in the early years of schooling. We also acknowledge that men can and should play an important role in taking responsibility for the education of children, including boys (Mills, 2000).

We recognize that many male teachers, especially gay male teachers, contend with and in some cases confront traditional constructs of masculinity in their daily routines. These male teachers have to resist the normalizing and homogenizing pressures they experience from some students, parents and other teachers to be the disciplinarian, the football coach and/or an advocate for boys' and men's rights (see Martino & Berrill, 2003; Berrill & Martino, 2002). The current calls for more male teachers do nothing to support these men. Instead, the essentialist assumptions about male teachers implicit in the Queensland policy and in similar arguments being proffered elsewhere will work to further marginalize men who perform non-traditional masculinities.

While we are heavily critical of attempts to attract more male teachers that are based upon fallacious assumptions about the supposed benefits for boys of having men in their lives, we do believe that men need to take greater responsibility for the welfare of children—both boys and girls. Such a responsibility would involve ensuring that both girls and boys receive a quality education and also working to resist the limitations imposed upon students by dominant constructions of gender. This responsibility is unlikely to be carried out unless some attention is given to creating a school environment where misogyny and homophobia are not tolerated.

Note

1. This study was commissioned by the DEST to ascertain the educational needs of boys in Australian schools. The views expressed in this paper are those of the authors and not necessarily those of DEST.

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