

VIEWPOINT

*Sex, Male Teachers and Young Children*

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**ABSTRACT** *The present case of a male student nursery nurse found guilty of sexually abusing children brought into focus the absence of policies on men working with young children in schools regarding such issues as how to handle physical contact, intimacy and masculinity, their female colleagues and the children in their care. This means individual male teachers have to construct their own frameworks in which to work 'safely' with children. If male teachers and children are to work together within a protective and supportive environment, issues involving sex and masculinity need to be given a forum for discussion.*

Jason Dabbs, a student nursery nurse, was sentenced in April 1993 to 7 years' imprisonment for sexually abusing young children. During the course of two nursery practice placements the student abused at least 60 children. The trial of the student nursery nurse was followed closely by the local media in the North-east of England. In one television interview the Chair of Newcastle Social Services Committee was asked whether, in future, men should be prevented from working with young children or allowed to work with them, thereby putting children in a position of potential abuse. The Chair responded by saying that it would be wrong to stop men from working with young children as much could be gained from such relationships, and the way to prevent abusive situations occurring is to set up more rigorous screening procedures. In this article I will argue that dealing with issues surrounding men nursery nurses/teachers and child sex abuse requires much more consideration than tightening up on screening procedures. Rather the focus would be better placed on the interrelationship of masculinity, sexuality and violence and its implications for child sex abuse. It is these issues which need to be addressed by initial teacher education and nursery nurse courses. To put these issues into context it is necessary to consider, first of all, how schools can be, and are, places where child abuse takes place.

Schools are institutions which, amongst other things, are power structures. Their power derives, in part, from their legitimated existence...children are compelled by law to attend school. Once at school, what they learn from the official curriculum is dictated by the demands of the National Curriculum, but what else they learn and how they learn

it is subject to the organisation of knowledge by individual schools and the sets of relationships which exist within them (Connell *et al.*, 1982). Within the school the teachers are the ones in powerful positions. Teachers have authority over their pupils in many areas including their behaviour, dress, knowledge, speech, as well as having a degree of control over children's time and physical space (Delamont, 1983; Hammerley, 1990). It has been suggested that the authority of the teacher has diminished in recent years (Woods, 1990) but it is fair to say that the majority of children in primary schools, and particularly infant aged children, comply with the authority of the teacher. However, this complicity does not provide children with a guarantee that teachers will always treat them with care and respect. Pollard (1985) has argued that the greatest potential threat to children being able to cope in school has to do with the power of the teacher and studies of children's experiences of schooling indicate that some teachers adopt strategies which undermine and humiliate their pupils (Woods, 1979; Purling, 1985; Bryson, 1989). Although the concept is rarely used in connection with teacher-pupil relationships, the use of such strategies comes within the definition of child abuse.

Child abuse is a term which encompasses a number of destructive types of behaviour performed by an adult (or adults) to a child (or children); that is, physical abuse and injury, neglect, emotional abuse or ill treatment, sexual abuse and potential abuse or high risk (Hearn, 1988). Whilst some child abuse factors such as physical and verbal aggression are used by both male and female teachers, the perpetrators of child sexual abuse are, for the most part, men. It should be noted that sexual abuse comes within the broad definition of child abuse as, at the present, there is no offence recognised in British law as 'child sexual abuse' (Maynard, 1993). Yet some clear distinctions need to be made because, with regard to places like schools, the circumstances which enable a sexual abuse situation are different to those in which physical and verbal abuse occur. For example, child abuse in the form of physical and verbal aggression by a teacher towards a pupil usually takes place in front of other members of the class or teaching colleagues, presumably in order to demonstrate the teacher's 'control'. This form of child abuse undertaken by teachers in public arenas does, at least, provide the victim with witnesses who could be called upon should they decide to pursue the incident. In contrast, child sexual abuse is carried out in isolation by a person in a position of trust. How can we address the issue of child sexual abuse in schools until it has clearly been named and defined? This naming and defining could contribute to the initial screening of men candidates for teaching and nursery nurse courses if, in the defining, there is a recognition of the interrelationship of masculinity, sexuality and violence.

Under present circumstances the initial screening of candidates for places on courses does not directly confront this issue. At the moment student teachers have to complete a 'Protection of Children' declaration before beginning their initial training course. Although cases are known in which people with police records for child sex abuse have been employed to work with young children, such instances are noted for their rarity. It is far more likely that a child sex abuser will slip through the official net because they do not have a police record. This leaves the interview process as the avenue in which to ascertain whether or not the candidate for student teaching or nursing is a child abuser. One of the most obvious problems here is what questions could be asked and how would they be phrased in order to identify child abusers? It would mean interviewers being alert and sensitive to the links between child sex abuse and masculinity, violence and sexuality rather than focusing on 'profiles' of child sex abusers.

The two most frequently given explanations of why some men sexually abuse children centre around psychological and economic and cultural factors. The psychological

explanation suggests men who sexually abuse children come from dysfunctional families in which they have suffered emotional deprivation and may well have been abused themselves (Driver, 1989). The second explanation is that some men resort to violence (including sexual abuse) when they have failed to achieve what society has led them to expect they are 'entitled' to, even though their individual 'life chances' would indicate such expectations were impossible to achieve. Both these arguments are reductionist and suggest the idea of the 'helpless victim'. A third explanation can be found in the work of feminists and pro-feminist men.

Hearn (1988) has argued that, too often, child abuse is discussed as an entity within itself without acknowledging that its roots lie in the construction of masculinity:

... child abuses, violence and sexualities to young people are ... a close development of 'normal' masculinity and 'normal' male sexuality; itself characterised by power, aggression, penis orientation, the separation of sex from loving emotion, objectification, fetishism, and uncontrollability. (p. 541)

The centrality of sexuality and violence in the development of hegemonic masculinity has been the focus of discussion by feminists and pro-feminist men (Farrelly, 1985; Brittan, 1989; Segal, 1990; Seidler, 1991). They have considered the arguments and statistics which point all too clearly to the fact that it is men who rape, men who attack each other and men who fight wars, but reject any claims that these manifestations of overt aggression are down to biology or psychology or culture. It is these kinds of arguments which suggest that men are helpless victims of their hormones/upbringing/war of life and, therefore, are unable or unlikely to change. Rather the argument is that the potential for violence (sexual and otherwise) is encoded in the way men are defined as men. On that basis *all* men have the potential for sexual violence but only *some* men sexually abuse young children.

It would seem that any attempt to tighten up on the screening procedures for those men wishing to become early years teachers or nursery nurses is fraught with difficulties. A more effective starting point would be to consider what the situation is at the moment and build on what we already know about the experiences and views on physical contact held by men teachers of young children.

#### **From Student to Teacher**

In 1988 I interviewed 11 male teachers and student teachers of early years children. Only five of them had made a conscious decision to undertake initial teacher training in the early years of schooling. None of those five recall any reference being made at interview for a place on an initial training programme to the fact that they were men entering an area of schooling traditionally staffed by females. During the course of their initial training programmes several of the teachers/student teachers indicated that their 'rarity value' was noted yet no explicit discussion ever took place of the implications for themselves, their female colleagues and the children of "putting a man in the reception class" (see Skelton, 1991).

This situation changed when it came to applying for posts in schools. Although the issue of male sexuality and child sex abuse was not addressed overtly, it was alluded to in order to put across what the local authority or school governing body deemed acceptable. Trevor, an experienced early years teacher, applied to an authority in the North-east of England for posts in infant schools and was told quite firmly at one interview that "We don't have men in infant schools". The authority did offer him a

job—with a Year 6 class (10–11 year olds). A similar experience was related by David, who had been running his own nursery school but had decided to apply for jobs in mainstream schooling:

... at the job interview, the chairman of governors said what ... could I do if a little girl was upset and crying. So I said I would put her on my knee and give her a cuddle ... the governor replied 'Oh no you couldn't do that, you would have to call the auxiliary'.

The notion that working with young children is 'right' only for women is deeply embedded within primary teaching. Caroline Seechurn (1988) has pointed to the reification of the feminine within primary teaching and this has been more sharply focused on by Burgess & Carter (1992) in their discussion of 'Mumsey' discourse:

'Mumsey' is the term used by one student who described the primary teachers' role as having qualities which reflected mothering, principally socially approved feminine virtues such as 'caring' and nurturance. (p. 353)

This means that all candidates for teaching/nursery nurse courses would be expected to demonstrate such traditionally ascribed female characteristics during an interview. Through the work of feminists there is now a much greater awareness of 'equal opportunities' and people are more attuned to the idea that men possess, and should demonstrate, their 'female' qualities. The problem is how can it be ascertained during an interview the point at which a male candidate's espoused caring concern for children's physical and emotional welfare crosses the boundary into abuse? In the same way, working with very young children often requires close physical contact, i.e. wiping bottoms, changing wet knickers and cuddling a hurt child. To ask a male candidate at interview whether they would be prepared to undertake such tasks sets up an insoluble situation. If there is an expression of willingness to take on all the aspects of what is invoked in early years teaching they run the risk of being seen as 'unsuitable'. On the other hand, if a negative response is given they would have to rely on the goodwill of female colleagues, and, in so doing, provide them with additional workloads as well as delivering the impression to children that 'men don't touch'.

Perhaps it is because of the problems involved in what questions to ask about subjects which interviewers appear to prefer to allude to rather than name, that men who work with young children are thrown on to their own devices. From the interviews with the early years male teachers it seemed that the issue of child sexual abuse and them, as men, continued to be there in the background of their daily work but was never directly confronted.

Having obtained jobs which necessitated daily physical contact with young children, none of them had discussed with colleagues and headteachers what strategies to adopt when it came to intimate physical contact with children. All the practising teachers had clearly defined ideas about their conduct which they decided for themselves individually (as most of them did not know each other despite the fact there were so few of them in the local area), but they clearly shared common principles. They were all committed to the belief that children should be hugged when they were hurt or upset. One teacher went on to say:

With things like hugging ... it's part of Kidscape, that a hug is a hug and they should know the difference between a nice hug that they like and hugs they don't like.

At the same time, all of them were prepared to change children or attend to injuries near

the genital area but only when they were observed by an adult female. Perhaps not surprisingly the student teachers were far more adamant in their views stating that under no circumstances would they change soiled underwear and, in some cases, were reluctant to help children dress and undress for physical education.

The point here is that no discussion seems to have taken place on initial teacher training programmes or by school governing bodies as to how male teachers can interact effectively with young children in the area of physical contact. This lack of open discussion can only contribute to the perpetuation of child sex abuse in primary and nursery schools.

### Ways Forward

Although the number of men who work with early years schoolchildren are small, there is a steady increase. For example, the number of men in nursery schools rose from six to 24 in the years 1980–90 (Department of Education and Science, 1990). However, the idea that there is something 'not quite right' with men who want to work with young children continues (Aspinwall & Drummond, 1989; Sheppard, 1989). The fact that some men opt for teaching which is seen as a 'soft option' in the list of male occupations (Connell, 1985) and add to that by focusing on primary education which is seen as particularly feminine (Seechurn, 1988), then further compound this by choosing to work with very young children, raises questions about their masculinity. I have argued elsewhere how the male teachers themselves deal with these issues (Skilton, 1991). The point here is how we in the education system can tackle the fact that some children are the victims of child sex abuse and that those abusers are usually men (Barker & Dunne, 1985). The concern has to be, not only that potential child abusers are prevented from obtaining jobs which put them in a position of trust with children, but also with those children who have been sexually abused and are then faced with a male teacher in school.

Whilst child abuse and sex education are areas which may receive consideration on initial and in-service courses, it seems that questions concerning the interrelationship of violence and sexuality with masculinity and the implications of this for child sex abuse are not raised. This is not surprising given that it has proved increasingly difficult in recent years for sex, sexuality, children and education to be mentioned in the same breath, as any attempts to raise such issues are usually greeted with a negative or a hostile response (De Lyon & Mignuolo, 1989; Holly, 1989; Kelly, 1992). However, unless these issues are addressed openly it will prove difficult to develop appropriate policies on men working with young children. Maher (1987) recommends that schools directly address child sex abuse by considering attitudes to women, attitudes to violence, attitudes towards parenthood and attitudes towards relationships. These areas should be discussed individually and in relation to each other on initial teacher education and nursery nurse courses. It is evident that hegemonic masculinity needs to be challenged using various means, and ways of working with boys in school to confront violence are beginning to emerge (Mehdzian, 1992; Phillips, 1993), and such measures should form a part of initial teaching/nursery nurse programmes.

In addition, some form of agreed national guidelines are required which cover the day-to-day aspects of school life. For example, when a young child injures himself or herself on the playground, who helps them? Who changes children for physical education? What happens when a child has soiled his or her underwear and is clearly distressed, but the male teacher has no immediate help available? Individual schools

could discuss these guidelines and develop their own approaches which would be built into their school practices. This would enable schools to introduce their policies on men teachers working with young children at interview, thus providing children with a clearer framework for protection and teachers with support and guidance. Inevitably, unless positive action is taken it will be children who pay the price for issues of masculinity, violence and child sex abuse being kept off the agenda.

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