

What's in the male?

Douglas Gosse and Annie Facchinetti explore being male in Canadian and Australian schools through the lens of sexuality, and minority status of men in the female dominated field of education



It's recess and a child is huddled up in a corner of the playground, sobbing to the point where she can't even talk. The teacher on yard duty notices and approaches the child. She attempts to find out what is wrong, but the girl is so distressed that the teacher can't make any headway. Instead, she embraces the weeping child, who collapses against her, relief at the gesture of sympathy immediately evident on her face.

The teacher in this scene behaved as any caring human being would in the same situation. One can easily imagine the child's anguish gradually abating until she is finally

able to share the cause of her grief, and having shared the problem, takes the first step to overcoming it.

Now re-picture the same scene, but instead of a woman, the teacher giving the comfort is male. Does it change your interpretation of the situation? Does it call the teacher's action more into question? If even a small part of you answered yes to either of these questions, you are not alone.

Teachers are a rare breed of human. Although there are many reasons why someone might choose to enter the profession, all teachers accept a fundamental responsibility for, and

care for the academic, social and emotional wellbeing of students. Traditionally this is often viewed as 'women's work', a notion borne out by the declining numbers of men choosing to become teachers in many countries around the world.

Australia and Canada are two such countries with common issues about encouraging men into the teaching profession. In 2006, there were 2.6 female teachers in Australia to every male, as against 2.5 in 2001 and 2.2 in 1996 (ABS, 2006). The primary sector in 2006 had the greatest imbalance, with a female to male ratio of 5.5.

In Ontario, Canada, there is also a perceived shortage of males in education, particularly at the primary and junior levels. Men comprise only 30 per cent of the whole teacher population in Ontario (Staff, 2006), with only one in 10 of all primary/junior (P/J) teachers, and less than one in three secondary teachers (Bernard, Hill, Falter, & Wilson, 2004) being male.

Gender imbalances can be problematic in education, a field in which role modelling of diversity is crucial for pupils to be able to envision career possibilities that defy traditional identity norms. In Canada, researchers and members of the public have identified the need for more men to serve as role models, and to enhance the learning of boys who progressively score less well than girls on provincial, national and international achievement tests.

A similar movement towards addressing the imbalance has been afoot in Australia for some time. In 2004, the Howard Government initiated an amendment to the *Sex Discrimination Act* that would allow teacher training institutions to offer scholarships exclusively to men. The proposal came after an application by the Sydney Catholic Education Office to receive a temporary exemption from the *Sex Discrimination Act* to allow them to offer male-only scholarships was turned down.

In Canada, as in Australia, it is often cited that many boys are struggling academically in school compared to many girls (Brown, 2003; Rice & Goessling, 2005), and that more females than males graduate high school and university (Finley, 2007; Frenette & Zeman, 2007). When a boy goes from a single mother home, which is increasingly common, to a female dominated school, he may not have a positive male role model until junior high school (Farrell, 2005; Parry, 2000).

According to a survey conducted in

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September 2008 from the Teacher Development Agency in Great Britain (Staff, 2008), male primary school teachers have acted as fundamental role models for one in two men; 35 per cent of men felt that having a male primary teacher challenged them to work harder at school and 22 per cent believed that male primary teachers helped build their confidence while they were young. Furthermore, the men questioned also said they were more likely to approach male teachers with issues of bullying (50%), problems at home (29%) and questions about puberty (24%). Sherman (2005) found that male teachers and male teacher candidates mention male teachers as role models influencing their decision to teach. Since 37 per cent of female education majors identified elementary school as the time when they decided to become an elementary teacher, at approximately three times the rate of male students (12%) (Montecinos & Nielsen, 1997), there are ongoing repercussions as recruitment and retention of male teachers dwindles, and surrounding debates continue to flourish.

This is not to say that female teachers cannot be effective educators and role models for males, with many boys feeling comfortable with confiding in women teachers, and deriving challenge and confidence from being in their classes. The issue, then, becomes not so much about the number of men in the teaching profession, as about the unique difficulties that men can face when they choose this career path.

In primary/junior schools, attitudes and actions toward male teachers most often take the form of erroneously linked homophobia and suspicions of potential paedophilia by both adults and children alike (Gosse, 2011).

Christopher Hoyne is a primary teacher with 25 years' experience in the Catholic school system in Australia, teaching both junior and senior grades in the course of his career. Not knowing what he wanted to do at the end of Year 12, he chose to enter teaching at the suggestion of his (male) English teacher, backing up the Sherman study indicating that male teachers are often a key influence on young men when they decide to become teachers.

Hoyne has experienced erastophobia firsthand during his career. "In the early 1990s, men weren't allowed to do duty in the courtyard where the toilets are," he recalls.

A Canadian study, *Tracing the Professional Journey of Male Primary-Junior Teachers in Ontario* (Gosse, 2011; Gosse, Parr, & Kristolaitis, 2010) explores the experiences of male primary teachers in order to add to understanding and awareness of the social, political, institutional, and structural variables that influence male teachers' decision to enter, remain in, or leave teaching. Of the 223 participants, many reported having similar experiences to Hoyne's:

"... another admin. wondered if it was OK to have a male in kindergarten due to 'what if a child has an accident and you are in the washroom by yourself with the child.' I asked if she felt the same way with a female teacher with kindergarten boys in the same situation... she quickly learned her negative viewpoint was just that."

In this case, the male teacher signals the interesting concept that

About the authors

Dr Douglas Gosse, from Nipissing University, Ontario, Canada, has coined the terms *androgenophobia*, the prevalent societal conviction that maleness, the male body, and male sexualities are somehow unclean, perverse, and menacing, and *erastophobia*, the pervasive attitude that all men are potential paedophiles, including fathers, youth volunteers, and teachers.

Annie Facchinetti, an Australian teacher, mother of two, and writer and editor, along with Douglas, compare these phenomena in Canadian and Australian education.



women teachers are less prone to accusations of sexual misconduct, and he dilutes the same sex association with paedophilia by pointing out a possible scenario of a woman teacher with a boy child. He was further able to reason with his principal and find common ground, but principals are not always so thoughtful and understanding.

In the following example, the physical presence and gaze of male teachers is enough to illicit erastophobic responses from students:

"Young, junior-aged students think (and accuse) male teachers for "looking at them" the wrong way."

Administrators, male and female teacher colleagues, pupils, as well as social acquaintances and friends relate this ubiquitous erastophobia:

"People act as though there is something "seedy" about being a guy who likes kids. Even though I have four of my own, there is a certain palpable suspicion that I have ulterior motives or something. A Grade 7 colleague even said that he had never met a 'non-gay' primary teacher. I would like to elaborate further because I have strong feelings on the subject."

While the teaching profession in general is often not held in high esteem by society, male teachers seem to be particularly susceptible to suspicion about their motives for teaching, and to questioning of their career choice. Christopher Hoyne believes that part of the reason there are less men than women in the profession is because it is "...perceived as being a bit girly. It's not really a cool profession. I don't like revealing that I am just a teacher, and not even a principal."

A pivotal study by Janet Smith (2004) from the University of Canberra had similar findings. According to Smith, identity construction as a 'real man' while doing 'women's work' can be a challenge for male teachers. Smith concludes that the nurturing culture of schools is in conflict with the calls for male teachers to act as strong role models for students.

The Australian experience is reiterated in Gosse's Canadian study. One participant reports the notion by some adults that there must be "something wrong with me in that I would want to work with little children. What are my real reasons", while another says, "There's a suspicion among some adults that there is something 'wrong' with a male who works with children." A third articulates these erastophobic inferences more overtly:

“Yes, I think that the public views male elementary teachers as perhaps potential sex-offenders and/or somehow less than a real man. All the public ever hears about is the bad thing a man did in the classroom. Male secondary teachers, in my view, are looked upon as intellectuals who prep kids for university.”

A call for more men to teach young children rings somewhat hollow, therefore, given the pervasive societal belief that men should not be around young children, especially problematic if the man is gay (King, 2004). This also creates a paradox for men who on the one hand may be breaking hegemonic stereotypes by simply being in a profession of child caring, but yet are prohibited from physical contact in the form of hugging or even hand-holding with their pupils. As one participant says, “There are still some people out there that believe that because I am a male primary teacher I will likely assault their child in a sexual manner,” while another echoes:

“Being of the male gender, I encountered some problems with parents, where they are somewhat weary [sic] of having a male elementary teacher teaching their young children. I believe that it is due to the fact that society perceives female elementary teachers as being ‘the nurturers’ and that if a male entered the elementary profession, they are going into it with another agenda.”

To counteract this regulation of physical contact with students, many male teacher candidates in Ontario, and practising teachers from a series of in-depth interviews, find ingenious ways to nurture beyond suspect physical contact, including giving ‘high fives’, verbal praise, allowing close proximity in seating to the teacher during, for instance, reading times, allotment of special classroom tasks such as helping collect books or building blocks or

There is no denying, however, that men draw much more scrutiny than women

clearing away varied pedagogical materials, to show students they care and to reward them, and displaying pupils’ work on classroom walls and hallways. The study found that male P/J teachers do this with both boys and girls, too.

Christopher Hoynes’ experiences in Victorian schools have seen him develop his own method for showing affection to children, engaging in a more playful approach that involves making puns on their names. Hoynes, too, is cautious about physical contact. He doesn’t initiate contact nor does he allow children to sit on his knee. He also refers students to a female teacher if they are injured under their clothes. These measures are certainly not unique to men; anecdotal evidence suggests that female teachers also think about how their behaviour might be construed if they have any physical contact with children, and strategies such as making sure at least two adults are present if an injury requires examination are common. There is no denying, however, that men draw much more scrutiny than women.

According to Sargent (1998, p. 213), male primary/junior teachers in the United States, also experience harassment and discrimination in the female-dominated workplace of education; it should come as no surprise that androgenophobia and erastophobia (Gosse, 2011) – fears around men’s ostensibly aggressive, uncontrollable, and dangerous sexualities and sexual identities, in direct binary opposition to the widespread belief of women, and thus women teachers, as sexually passive, benign nurturers – emerge as the most dominant markers of male teachers’ frequent subjugation, whether in North America

or Australia, thereby reinstating these binary images, so as to police and limit males’ access to the female dominated education workplace.

Janet Smith’s study, *Male primary teachers: Disadvantaged or advantaged?* (2004), investigated both the advantages and disadvantages that male teachers experience in a female dominated industry. The study identified eight categories of disadvantage that might affect male teachers, ranging from the aforementioned societal suspicion of men who choose teaching as a profession, to status and pay issues. Interestingly, the study also found four categories of advantage including positive discrimination in terms of both attaining a position and being promoted. While schools cannot advertise specifically for a male teacher, in Australia at least, it is not unheard of for female teachers to feel that males might be favoured for a job or promotion because of their gender, especially if a school has few or even no men on staff.

This last point brings some important perspective to the push for recruiting male teachers. According to John Hattie (Hattie, 2003), Professor of Education at the University of Auckland, teachers account for 30 per cent of the variance in student outcomes. With student success depending on teacher quality to such a high degree, it is worth considering that recruiting and promoting the most capable teachers of either gender should be a priority.

The other side of the positive discrimination coin is that men can find it difficult to assimilate to or succeed in a female-dominated work-environment. In male-dominated organisations, Benchop and Dooreward (1998) claim that women need to fight extra hard to prove their potential and to refute stereotypical prejudices about women and careers, and it is likely that men have to similarly tread carefully as primary/

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junior teachers, and work hard to prove their worth and fit, with their own sexualities at the forefront of contention.

Moreover, in the Ontario study, a male teacher relates how 'sexually harassing behaviour that would never be condoned were it to happen to a woman is routine in my school. Teachers assume that a young male teacher can be teased and sometimes bullied. Another states, "...as a male, I will not take part in any jokes of a sexual nature. However, myself and other male staff members are subjected to them frequently."

Christopher Hoyne reports similar attitudes in Australian schools. "Women often make sexual comments, but if a man says the same thing in the same company, it is different. You have to be selective," he says. Hoyne also suggests that comments that stereotype men, such as "Typical male, he can only do one thing at a time," are accepted in the staffroom, but equivalent comments from men about women would not be tolerated.

Smith's (2004) research backs this up. Working with women, loneliness and lack of socialisation was one of the categories of disadvantage identified by her investigations, with the result that many male teachers actively seek out male companionship, "clustering with other male teachers in the school, male principals and the janitor."

When asked whether they feel that male primary/junior teachers have certain unique traits or qualities that they bring to early childhood education in Gosse's Canadian research, 198 out of the 223 participants shared their views, a number of them using familial metaphors such as 'father figure' and 'big brother'. Others state varied approaches to learning and nurturing as characteristic of many male teachers: 'stability, creativity, accountability, alternative learning styles,

Many of the negative aspects of being a male teacher are common to both Australia and Canada

nurturing care' and 'Nurturing, but not overly protective. Positive role models.'

Many of the participants assert that male teachers seem less rigid in their approaches to teaching, and less harsh with discipline, too, contrary to the popular view that men are sterner disciplinarians and women 'softer':

"...perhaps one characteristic that males do bring to teaching is a tendency to break the rules and therefore, perhaps, to let students push the limits."

"Most have a different approach to teaching (less rigid in terms of structure of class)..."

"A qualified yes. I have seen some female teachers with the same traits, but, most of the males I know seem to possess a more relaxed attitude, and include humour a lot more in their teaching styles. There is a sense of playfulness and excitement that I don't see in most of my female colleagues."

Hoyne has made this sense of playfulness into a vocation, currently teaching Performing Arts two days a week at two different schools. Like the teachers in the Canadian study, he also has a less traditional approach to teaching that allows him to nurture the confidence of his charges in a less structured environment and is well suited to the direction that his career has taken. Indeed, Smith's research found that "a small but significant amount of literature... documents the way that male primary teachers carve out specialisations and niches as a means of separating and differentiating themselves from their female colleagues..."

It is interesting that many of the negative aspects of being a male teacher are common to both Australia and Canada. We need to be vigilant that prejudice and acts of discrimination against men are acknowledged, discussed, and remedied, especially since men may likely become minorities in a growing number of professions in the near future, beyond education. The issue certainly presents its challenges, not least because 'men' are not a neat, homogenous group with the same experiences and characteristics, any more than 'women' are. Female educators often take great pains to ensure that the lessons and activities they offer their students will interest and include the boys in their classes, but in the business of school life it is possible that the potentially precarious position of their male colleagues is overlooked.

It is imperative that high-calibre candidates of both genders make their way into teaching. Smith (2004) suggests strategies including providing support to males already teaching, and developing clear and explicit guidelines to help men protect themselves from 'unnecessary risks and allegations of impropriety' to make teaching more desirable for men, without disadvantaging women. Gosse, Parr and Kristolaitis (2010) recommend media and marketing campaigns should be implemented to promote teaching as a viable choice for men but first, androgenophobia and erastophobia need to be addressed, so that men feel safer opting for a career in education.

It is easy to lose sight of the issues men who want to pursue teaching as a career encounter in the face of high profile agendas such as test results and funding, but it would certainly be a loss if societal pressure and inaccurate perceptions meant that many of our potentially great teachers were excluded from the profession merely because they are male.

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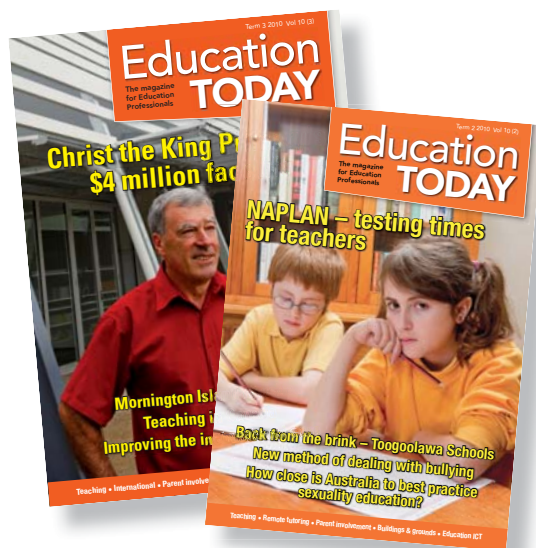
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