# Gendered Workplaces

## Experiences of the Beginning Male Teacher

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*Abstract: The paper looks at gendered positionings of a small group of beginning male teachers currently working in schools in Queensland Australia. In recent years there has been much talk about the 'crisis' in masculinity, the declining numbers of male teachers and imminent retirement of experienced male teachers from Australian schools. Within this 'crisis' a range of discourses have emerged that position male teachers in diverse ways. This positioning not only constructed males in traditional images premised by such comments as 'real men' but also highlighted particular issues that impacted differently on male teachers to their female colleagues. It is argued in this paper that the gender construction of teaching bodies impact on the way in which both men and women practice teaching. While there is acknowledgement of negative stereotypes attached to the male body that does teaching, survey data illustrated that positive rewards, pleasures experienced and anticipated by male teachers motivated their desire to take up teaching as a profession. Discourses within the data construct the male teacher as a 21st century male Learning Manager who is as a second career male. He enjoys working with children, wants a family friendly job and wants to be recognised as someone who can nurture the educational journey of students in his care. Therefore in this paper I explore the contradictory and ambiguous discourses concerning male teachers and present the results of an online survey that looked at the contemporary context and experiences of a group of beginning male teachers in Queensland, Australia. These results are discussed in relation to expectations in the teaching workplace and implications for the retention of male teachers.*

Keywords: Male Teachers, Gender, Workplace, Masculinity

## Introduction

**IN RECENT YEARS** there has been much talk about the 'crisis' in masculinity, the declining numbers of male teachers and imminent retirement of experienced male teachers from Australian schools. At the same time teaching has become a highly 'feminised' workspace where women have been positioned as nurturers, babysitters, carers and teachers. The boundaries between public and private spheres have been challenged as school and teachers increasingly take on roles that were once seen as part of the home or church (Barry & King, 2002). Discourses circulating in society (at a macro-level) and in school (at the micro-level) position male and female teachers differently which, in turn, have specific consequences. The female body is seen as a site of maternal care and is valued when women nurture; conversely the male body is seen as a site of action and strength and is valued when men protect the vulnerable as in being a soldier or peace keeper in these days of terrorism. There is a fine line between caring and protecting – women protect their children and are positioned as caring; men protect the country and are positioned as fighters. These contradictory discourses signal the rich, dynamic and fluid context of bodies, sex and gender and one dynamic context where these discursive constructions combine is the teacher or 21st century Learning Manager.

The data drawn on for this article comes from an online survey that was distributed to beginning male teachers employed in the state schooling sector and the catholic education sector. School email addresses of the beginning male teachers were sourced from schools across the State and Catholic education sectors in Queensland, Australia. Over four hundred teachers were invited to participate on the survey with 105 responding. The aim of the online survey was two fold; firstly, to ask about the experiences of a small group of beginning male teachers and secondly, to establish what kind of support they would like to see provided for male teachers as they enter a workplace that is often hostile for the male body. This survey is part of a larger study that involved linking male Bachelor of Learning Management (BLM) students with experienced male teachers in a mentoring relationship. This research offered the opportunity to explore discourses of self-teacher identity and gender construction of the beginning male teacher. Throughout this paper I have included the voices of the respondents to illustrate their experiences as beginning male teachers in Queensland.

This paper is divided into three main sections with the first section outlining the background that led to a concentrated focus on recruitment into teaching and asks why the concern with males in teaching? The second section looks at bodies, sex and gender

construction where contradictory and ambiguous discourses are explored and what this means for male bodies in teaching. The third section examines expectations in the teaching workplace and the implications for male teachers.

## Why the Concern with Males in Teaching?

In the Western world there has been increasing concern and alarm about the plight of boys. There are concerns that boys are failing in the school system and with the declining numbers of male teachers. There is alarm that girls are outperforming boys and that many students only ever experience a female teacher (BBC reporter, 2005; Bricheno & Thornton, 2002; Matters *et al.*, 1997). In Australia there has been much media speculation and general conversation about a crisis in masculinity, the lack of male role models – in particular the lack of fathers, and how many boys are becoming a 'lost' generation. In response to these matters a House of Representatives report "Boys: Getting it right" (Commonwealth of Australia, 2002) found that boys and girls have different needs, respond to different learning styles, methods of assessment, peer and teacher relationships.

At the Queensland State level, there was increasing concern about the declining numbers of male teachers and speculation that lack of male role models within schools could exacerbate this 'crisis in masculinity'. As a response Education Queensland developed the Male Teacher's Strategy (Education Queensland, 2002). This strategy was promoted as a commitment to create an inclusive work environment and provide students with diverse learning experiences. While the number of male teachers is considerably less than that of female teachers within the Education Queensland workforce (Education Queensland, 2002, p. 1) recent QTAC figures would suggest that there has been a steady increase in males taking up positions in teacher training programs in Queensland universities.

Data supplied by the Strategic HR Division of Education Queensland demonstrates a steady increase in applications for places in teacher training programs by males across 2000-2005, plus a steady increase in the number of males taking up offers of university places (see table 1). These figures also demonstrate a consistent division in the allocation of university places between males and females. Between 2000-2005 75% of places were allocated to female applicants and 25% to male applicants. During this period the number of males enrolling has risen from 747 to 1047 with female applicants rising from 2579 to 3010 indicating an overall rise of enrolments in teaching training. These figures do not show whether applicants are mature age or school leavers. Rather than insufficient recruitment or interest of male applicants for teacher places, these figures imply a gendered allocation of university places in eduation programs. This indicates teaching as a sexual division of labour.

**Table 1: QTAC Applicants Listing an Education Course at a Queensland University as their First Preference 2000-2001 to 2004-2005**

| | 2000-2001 | mid 2001 | 2001-2002 | mid 2002 | 2002-2003 | mid 2003 | 2003-2004 | mid 2004 | 2004-2005 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Female | 4,625 | 91 | 4,600 | 49 | 4,617 | 32 | 4,510 | 36 | 5,155 |
| As % of Total First Prefs | 76.5% | 79.8% | 74.5% | 76.6% | 73.5% | 71.1% | 72.9% | 64.3% | 73.7% |
| Male | 1,420 | 23 | 1,573 | 15 | 1,663 | 13 | 1,675 | 20 | 1,843 |
| As % of Total First Prefs | 23.5% | 20.2% | 25.5% | 23.4% | 26.5% | 28.9% | 27.1% | 35.7% | 26.3% |
| Total | 6,045 | 114 | 6,173 | 64 | 6,280 | 45 | 6,185 | 56 | 6,998 |
| | | | | | | | | | |

| QTAC Applicants who were offered and who Enrolled in an Education Course at a Queensland University 2000-2001 to 2004-2005 | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | 2000-2001 | mid 2001 | 2001-2002 | mid 2002 | 2002-2003 | mid 2003 | 2003-2004 | mid 2004 | 2004-2005 |
| Female | 2,579 | 42 | 2,432 | 26 | 2,156 | 9 | 2,219 | 18 | 3,010 |
| As % of Total First Prefs | 77.5% | 82.4% | 76.2% | 81.3% | 74.8% | 75.0% | 73.1% | 69.2% | 74.2% |
| Male | 747 | 9 | 760 | 6 | 727 | 3 | 817 | 8 | 1,047 |
| As % of Total First Prefs | 22.5% | 17.6% | 23.8% | 18.8% | 25.2% | 25.0% | 26.9% | 30.8% | 25.8% |
| Total | 3,326 | 51 | 3,192 | 32 | 2,883 | 12 | 3,036 | 26 | 4,057 |
| QTAC Ltd | | | | | | | | | |

Bodies, caring and teaching: A sexual division of labour Hargreaves (1997) describes teaching in contemporary society as difficult, demanding and complex emotional work; work often associated with a sexual division of labour and women's work. The notion of a sexual division of labour constructs and reinforces a division between the public and private spheres. As Spivak (1990, p. 377) explains the political, social, professional, economic and intellectual belong to the public while the emotional, sexual and domestic are part of the private. These binaries have consequently associated men with the public and women with the private where a sexual division of labour has then neatly allocated particular jobs based on a biologically determinist argument. Challenging this biological determinist argument, Butler (1990) argues it is through repetitive gendered performances by specific bodies, labelled male or female, that a sexual division of labour has come to be seen as 'natural' and 'normal'. Unfortunately consequences of this sexual division of labour have meant little choice for many women. In contemporary times caring for children and those responsibilities seen as 'domestic' in nature have remained both an expectation and a reality for Australian women to attend to (Wearing, 1996, p. 143). Coupled with this has been a growing expectation that women also move in and out of the workplace to supplement the household income, working as a 'reserve army' (Beechey, 1987) to smooth out the rises and falls in employment requirements. This has resulted in the perception of a feminisation of the labour market.

The feminisation of the labour market and the issue of childcare have had certain consequences; many women have become concentrated in particular occupations and in work away from the core of valued workers. As a result many of these occupations are now regarded as 'women's work' with teaching being one. Teaching, specifically early childhood and primary teaching, is an area where discourses of caring and nurturing have been closely associated with women's bodies. Because of this association teaching has often been perceived as a 'pseudo-childcare occupation' and as such, primary teaching has become largely the realm of women. This has resulted in material consequences, for example, there is a perception that teaching has low status and subsequently lower pay compared to other non-feminised occupations such as dentistry or law. For some 'real' teaching and learning begins in secondary school. Another consequence of this discursive construction is the negative label assigned to men entering this occupational field. The changing patterns in workplace participation add another layer of complexity to the issue of male teachers.

## Changing Workplace Patterns of Employment

When thinking about the contemporary workplace particular trends or patterns of employment are emerging. There is a growing casual, part time and contract sector that is now making up the larger periphery while there is a smaller but more exclusive and selective core of highly paid full time workers. Associated with this is the notion of the portfolio career (Waite, 2002) refering to a viable and rewarding alternative to full time work with one employer where a job or work can include a number of on-going jobs at any one time. While this idea is not new, it is now regarded as a new approach to 'the way we work' in contemporary Western society. For many males the notion of the 'reserve army' (Beechey, 1987) enables them to work in casual positions, either the hospitality and retail sectors, as they attend university. For some students changing careers there is the option of continuing casual work in their previous occupations during their transition phase. This is more likely for those moving from the 'trades'[1] sector to the professional sector. This connection to a

[1] The trades sector in this context refers to electricians, carpenters, painters and plumbers.

workplace provides the opportunity for learning what is loosely termed 'people skills'. There are now certain expectations associated with the workplace regarding levels of skill and 'workplace readiness' that accompany this changing workplace. Manuel (2003) draws attention to how teaching can be perceived as a career phase rather than a lifelong vocation as does the following comments:

> As a qualified electrician and holding a Bachelor of Education I can make a lot of money in other sectors. I can only see myself being a teacher for a maximum of five years (respondent 7).

Expectations in the teaching workplace: Implications for male teachers During the 1990s there was considerable research done concerning the impact of that first year of teaching on both the personal and professional life of a beginning teacher (Manuel, 2003). For many the issue is now retention of male teachers rather than solely recruitment. One of the commonest strategies used to support new employees in the workplace is to offer mentoring. Mentoring supports both individual and collegial learning in the workplace and has the potential to change school cultures. More teaching practice and access to mentoring were very strong themes emerging from the survey data. Both of these activities were seen as mechanisms enabling the beginning male teacher to adjust to workplace expectations.

There are certain expectations associated with the 'teaching' workplace. Manuel (2003) and de Vries (2004) point to the perception that being the 'good teacher' means someone who can easily blend into the current workplace culture. It's about how well you 'fit' with your workplace, keeping in mind that the workplace is not a homogenous entity. In this day and age when there is competition for jobs, to be seen as a good worker you need to devote commitment to, and to demonstrate total focus on, your job. For those people on contracts or casual work, being seen as 'fitting in' often means the difference between working and being unemployed. Fitting in can also be seen as creating a niche within a workplace and establishing an identity. Often this can involve negotiating competing discourses as highlighted by respondent 59 who is trying to fit into a culture, establish his identity as a male teacher and assert a masculine identity through his 'difference' to female teachers:

> Teaching has become a female dominated profession and policies have been written with women in mind. Not that there is anything wrong with the way that they teach – it is just that men have a different approach (respondent 59).

Here the respondent remarks on how he perceives that men have a different approach or different teaching style to women. In a highly feminised occupation such as teaching the male body can be seen as a 'suspicious' body. Sargent (2004, p. 188) describes many male teachers as being caught between a rock and a hard place where the "normal markers of masculinity in foreign environments are seen as dangers" however if these men were to display any feminine markers associated with the nurturing maternal female body then they run the risk of being labelled as homosexual. I would argue that some performances of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1995, 2002) result from negotiating discourses and surveillance of bodies in highly sexualised occupations. It can be argued that teaching style could be more about avoiding situations that might be misconstrued and re-creating the 'real man' image demanded or expected by some parents as illustrated by the following comments:

> Male teachers often leave due to parents' attitudes and unrealistic expectations as well as many pre-conceived ideas as portrayed in the media (respondent 20).

It is possible to argue that some respondents feel that expectations are gendered that then requires different performances. In the following comments the male teachers are acutely aware of their sexed bodies and that parents and female colleagues have preconceived gendered ideas about 'teaching performances' by male teachers. These respondents express the notion that there are different performances asked of men and that there are likely to be different consequences to the same performances when done by female teachers:

> The vulnerability that male teachers can be in. By saying that I mean the way that male teachers have to take extra precautions to protect themselves from losing their good names and reputations (repondent18).
> A change in attitude that 'men' can actually teach young children and that we can provide strong and positive role models to children (respondent7).
> The politics and the way that men are treated being the minority; the higher expectations for men who are in the department (respondent 17).
> [I]f you could change public perceptions of males working with children [more males would stay in teaching](respondent 21).
> Breaking down the barriers between males and females in the workplace; in my short experience there has been a large barrier on communication and expectations of male and female

> staff members within the school (respondent 32).

These teachers imply that there are different expectations associated with sexed bodies. Women's bodies are seen as a site of maternal care while this is valued in women it is certainly not valued in male bodies. It is also possible to identify from within these discourses the ways in which male teachers are being positioned differently to female teachers through the construction of heterosexuality, femininity and masculinity. These constructions are played out through the practices of real bodies and have material consequences. Respondent 1 would like to see less stereotyping of men when it comes to allocating tasks within school:

> My least enjoyable time [as a beginning teacher] was when I was the only male [at a particular school and was asked to] – carry this for me, get the balls off the roof, teach the 'tough' class, go on every camp, coach every team, change Miss Jane's tyre, have I made my point (respondent 1)?
>
> Less reliance on males to run and monitor sporting events would be a bonus (respondent 26).

These comments illustrate the different expectations assigned to the respondents as a male and as a male teacher. As Rowan (2000, p. 166) describes, experience is always embodied; that is, the experiences a person has in a workplace can and must be read as tied to their body. While women have been positioned the same as men by legislative discourses such as equity policies, because of cultural messages attached to women's bodies and men's bodies, a traditional (and often less formal) discourse continues to circulate that positions teachers as gendered bodies as evidenced by the following comments:

> Regardless of equity male teachers have to be extremely careful (respondent 18).
>
> The media hype over isolated cases involving male teachers puts males off teaching and forces current male teachers to consider 'is it worth the risk of false accusations?' (respondent 56).

Traditional discourses attach meanings that construct women's bodies as sites of nurturing, caring and emotional labour rather than sites of academic labour. Traditional discourses construct men's bodies are sites of physical action, aggressiveness and discipline. Making this embodiment visible is important because it goes towards understanding why some bodies are seen as 'out of place' (McDowell, 1999). If a body is perceived as out of place then it is highly likely to be viewed as a 'suspicious' body (Sargent, 2004).

According to Gatens (1992, p. 131), socially appropriate bodies are produced by the micro-political operations of power. This does not necessarily mean that only female teachers are 'good teachers'; instead it means that women are more likely to fit a 'symbolic' as opposed to 'real' body (Braidotti, 1994). This makes for uneasy times when only certain kinds of bodies have value in a particular workplace or when only certain performances by particular bodies are valued.

This raises significant questions about the reasons for employing male and female bodies in teaching. While female bodies are considered the maternal emotional site desired in the caring and nurturing of students, male bodies are perceived as sites of discipline and order. This discipline and order are required to keep those unruly students under control. This, in turn, implies that male teachers provide law and order while female teachers offer care and nurturing, thus reinscribing traditional gendered constructions of 'Woman' and 'Man'. This also suggests that female teachers cannot discipline unruly students. Links can be made here between the traditional images of male role models and father figures and raises issues about what kinds of role models are being sought out in male teachers.

I believe that this is a significant concern for future employers and employees, especially when considering that stress levels, discrimination and workplace bullying complaints are increasing (Fox, 2003; Odgers, 2002). Martinez (2004, p. 99) declares that even the very best of teacher education programs will only ever be able to prepare graduates to begin to teach. Therefore workplace mentoring of newly appointed teachers will be of even greater importance and mentoring relationships can be site for addressing those issues that face beginning male teachers.

Issues for beginning male teachers:

> Sex and gender are not the only issues that concern the beginning male teachers. Often these teachers leave the profession because they have been unable to adjust the demands of full time teaching. These demands include negotiating school cultures, colleagues and parents. Many of the respondents remarked on the negotiation of expectations that they sensed from parents:
>
> Parents may worry about their child being in a class that has a first year teacher; this could contribute to their expectations of you and sometimes a parent group or community could be a challenge (respondent 1).
>
> Community expectations are unrealistic considering their platform of non-involvement in controlling their own children (respondent 55).

Manuel (2003, p. 145) observed that there was no distinction between beginning and experienced teachers as far as parent, student and community accountability. I would argue that in this survey while some of the teachers felt that parents were aware of them as a new teacher, they were expected to perform as an experienced teacher. One respondent explained how this had played out in his high school class:

> I had the friend of a parent dress up as a student and join my class on my first day. The roll wasn't up to date and she appeared young. After first break she went home without my knowledge and I thought I was one student short until I'd found out what had happened. She had done it to check out my teaching style – well that was the excuse (respondent 33).

Staff politics was uppermost in many of the comments sent in by the respondents. This was one of the commonest issues that the teachers considered would impact on their decisions to remain in teaching. Ewing and Smith (2003, p. 18) report on the cynicism of older colleagues and the isolation of younger teachers in a 'greying' profession while Manuel (2003, p. 143) talks of the unprofessional behaviour of colleagues. One respondent felt both generational and gender isolation:

> [There's] a lack of other males in the profession; it is difficult to relate to other members of staff as my interests are completely different. Also the fact of younger staff I am the only member of staff who is in their 20's and find general staff activities to be boring (respondent 5).

Another respondent highlighted a general combination of factors that he felt many teachers now face:

> 'Cotton-wooling' of kids at home, lack of discipline at home, staff politics, bitterness of some teachers, despondency of others, constraints by administration about stuff they understand little about (respondent 10).

Beginning teachers can challenge experienced staff to think about those taken-for-granted practices (Ewing & Smith, 2003), they can also be caught between staffroom tensions and also experience pressure to conform to particular workplace cultures, especially where there is resistance to change in teaching practices and curriculum content. Manuel (2003) warns that if the beginning teacher overtly or covertly subverts the norms of the staffroom the toll can be high, resulting in being subtly ostracised or ignored by colleagues. In such cases beginning teachers can be told that they are not working as part of the team. This has consequences for self-esteem, self-efficacy and the construction of a professional identity as a teacher. Beginning teachers have knowledge of current curriculum documents and new teaching and learning strategies that can be shared as a valuable resource rather than a threat.

Bringing these strands together constructs contemporary teaching is a demanding, emotionally charged and complex profession. Teaching in the 21st century happens in a changing environment that is impacted by policies, procedures, legislation and social expectations. This makes for a 'greedy institution' (Franzway, 2001) where teachers are often become burnt out, left to struggle in isolation or learn to 'fit' certain workplace cultures. Consequently many teachers leave the profession within the first 2-3 years. This is where having a mentor can be valuable for some students and beginning teachers. The data included within this paper comes from a larger project called Mates where experienced male primary teachers are trained as mentors then linked with pre-service teacher students where many of the issues highlighted throughout this paper can be discussed and challenged. Manuel (2003) has argued that teaching can be viewed more as a phase rather than a vocation and through this kind of lens the concept of teaching is both an episodic and a longer-term enterprise. This has consequences for teacher preparation and retention. The survey data presented has provided a snapshot of the concerns and suggestions of a group of beginning male teachers in Queensland. This data provides evidence of issues and concerns raised by beginning male teachers that experienced male primary teachers can address in the mentoring relationship.

## Conclusion

In this paper I have explored the context of the contemporary teaching workplace through an analysis of survey data from 105 beginning male teachers in Queensland. The changing nature of the teaching workplace, issues being faced by male teachers, the diversity of applicants entering the profession, plus the combination of federal and state policy concerning the recruitment and, more importantly, the retention of quality male teachers provided the direction and impetus for Mates, a male mentoring program. This program was designed to assist male primary teachers to develop their own support 'network' while offering support beginning male teachers. This program was in parallel to current state and federal policies where there has been an active focus on attracting males into teaching. While this kind of support network is advantageous for both male and female teachers, there are some issues that impact differently on male teachers, namely social expectations and negative images that concern care and nurturing

discourses. Ultimately teaching is about quality teachers, both male and female, and by supporting beginning male teachers to develop into quality teachers and remain in the profession, stereotypical images and negative labels assigned to the male teaching body can be challenged and replaced.

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