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Men and Teaching: Good Intentions and Productive Tensions

This article points to the complex context of what often is seen as both unproblematic and problematic simultaneously—men and teaching. In addition to brief words on the articles included in this special issue of JMS, the Guest Editors reflect on the contradictions, tensions, strategies and experiences of men who teach. This introduction aims to cultivate a greater awareness of the personal and political debates from which this collection of research arises so that educators may develop and harvest the great pedagogical contribution that men can offer—not just by being biologically male, but by recognizing the potential of modeling the multiplicity of manhood. The authors remind readers that a critical gender analysis of men in classrooms must serve the ultimate goal of improving the educational and social lives of children—both boys and girls.

Keywords: gender and education, masculinities, men teachers, male teachers, boys and schooling, male role models

If you are a man and you walk into any elementary school classroom the children are very interested and excited about who you are. They ask questions, like, “who’s daddy are you?” or “why do you have a beard?” They are curious and want to know more about you. This curiosity arises partly from the rarity of the presence of men teachers¹ in elementary schools. The low numbers of men teachers, and the habitual absence of a critical examination of the complexity of gender and education is partly what this special issue aims to address. We, too, have been curious about men teaching and have devoted our careers to education and to understanding the role that gender plays in ed-

¹ As awkward as this phrasing may seem to the eye/ear, we use the phrase ‘men teachers’ when we are referring to the gendered aspects of male teachers. ‘Male teacher’ is used when we are specifically referring to the biological sex of the teacher, as in: “...low numbers of male teachers in schools”. We feel it is important to use the term ‘men teachers’ to highlight that, for the most part, it is gender (not biological sex) that is at the heart of the various debates about men and teaching.

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^b MenTeach.

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educating children. As guest co-editors of this special issue on Men and Teaching, we hope to advance the discussions about the implications, contradictions, fears, frustrations, joys, and possibilities of men teaching. We want to know what effect having a man teacher in the classroom has, particularly for younger children. We want to tease apart the details of the related research and begin to examine the lives of men teachers. Our commitment to examining men in teaching is, however, ultimately about ensuring our gender analysis can foster better education for all students.

In examining this topic we could not ignore the numerous articles in newspapers and online exchanges all over the world about the low numbers of male teachers in schools. We have often noticed that just before a new school year commences, the media, teachers, administrators, and/or parents draw attention to the fact that there are fewer and fewer men teachers. For many, the presence of men educators has an impact on the education of our children. But how exactly does gender and teaching change the educational and social lives of students? Does the interest that children have in a man in the classroom or school make them a role model simply because they are male? What is it that men can contribute to teaching and learning *as men*? In asking these questions we do not wish to slip into an essentialist trap that flattens the rich diversity of men and masculinity, or to pit men teachers against women teachers. We are clear that this exploration is neither simply about men versus women nor boys versus girls. We would be very naïve (if not plain lazy) to think the complexity of gender could be boiled down to sex difference. We hope that an examination that acknowledges the multiple personal, professional, and pedagogical influences will allow us to consider the various ways masculinity can be mediated and modeled through the act of teaching, to celebrate the diversity of what men bring to the classroom.

Historically men played a much more central and active role in teaching. In the United States during the 1700 to the mid-1800s, teachers were primarily men (Nelson, 2002; Tyack & Hansot, 1992). As gendered expectations changed historically, the issue of men and teaching also shifted over time. At one point in both the United States as well as in Ireland, men were forbidden by law, to teach younger children due to a gendered assumption that women have a stronger moral character than men, and that men may be a poor influence on young children (Ní Bhroiméil, 2006; Perlman & Margo, 2001). As many of the contributing authors point out, the numbers of men teachers today remain disproportionately low. The decrease in men teachers is, of course, a reflection of a broader change occurring in society about gender roles and occupations (United Nations, 2004). In the United States, for the first time in history, more women work outside the home than men (United States Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2010). Women are serving in combat zones and even in the United States Navy on submarines (U.S. Navy Military, 2010). The examination of gender and work suggests that gendered labor is changing faster than our beliefs about gender (Hearn, 1996; Williams, 1991, 1993).

The best example of this gender disconnect is illustrated by the incessant call for more male role models² for boys in the popular media across Western/post-industrial-

² Note here the term most people are familiar with ‘male role model’ suggests the modeling of biological sex—maleness—as opposed to modeling particular qualities of being a man, young

ized countries over the past 15-20 years. The result of this message has led few people to question this need, yet at the same time, the characteristics of what kind of role model boys and young men need is rarely defined. In addition, the way in which men teachers might fill this need is poorly examined. The absence of, or resistance to, a critical gender analysis of men and teaching has left educators, school administrators, and parents/guardians without the tools to properly address what it is boys and young men (as well as girls and young women) need to see modeled by men teachers. It also leaves men teachers without a conscious understanding of what they can offer students as role models and simultaneously as a teacher.

There is a wealth of feminist and profeminist research that has demonstrated successful gender modeling for girls and young women (Friedan, 1983; Gilligan, 1982; Joncich, 1991; Valenti, 2007). However, when it comes to boys and young men, the field becomes divided between, on the one side, a populist call for male role models where gender is implicit (i.e., “boys will be boys”), but not always critically examined, and, on the other side, hyper-analysis and little definition of what should be modeled (i.e., gender is a social construct and is fluid). The difficulty in defining role models, then, stems from conflict and tension regarding popular understanding of masculinity and a reliance on narrow gender expectations for boys and young men. Unfortunately, this special issue cannot solve this problem, but we hope that the collection of research will begin to broaden the masculinity playing field, and not simply offer a micro-analysis of only the grass under our feet.

We believe that the combination of these articles fosters dialectical thinking. That is, the tensions and contradictions surrounding men and teaching do not exist because one perspective or theory is correct and will eventually prevail over all others. Rather, the tensions and contradictions offer us a point of entry for greater understanding, and the possibility for change. As such, we believe it is more productive to work *with* the tensions instead of attempting to resolve them, or explain away the contradictions.

We would like to suggest that the argument that men teachers have something to offer children is more radical than it may seem. It is radical because when we examine men and teaching, historically hegemonic masculinity has had a limited, and yet often inequitable role in schools. How might we address the need for more male role models for boys and young men, while at the same time acknowledge that teaching and mentoring requires caring and nurturing qualities? Again, our argument here is not to simply point out that men can take up this role as well as women can, this should go without

man, or boy. The fact that when we say ‘male role model’ we take for granted that we mean modeling manhood, manliness or ‘being a guy’, suggests a lack of understanding of the fundamental distinction between sex and gender. We have retained the term ‘male role model’ in this introduction, but feel it is necessary to point to how language can distort, and prevent a gender analysis. If this were not the case it would be easy to speak of ‘man role modeling’ and the importance of more ‘masculine teachers’ in elementary schools. As this introduction argues, exploring tensions between biological sex and gender can lead us to greater understanding and more equitable linguistic, social, and educational relations.

saying. Investigations into how challenging this may be to some men distract us from the goal of quality education and improving the lives of children.

How then does this special issue work with the tensions and contradictions of gender and education and interrupt habitual thinking about men and teaching? The first paper by Marcus Weaver-Hightower, “Male Preservice: Teachers and Discouragement from Teaching” interrogates the flashpoints and thresholds of gender from the perspective of men who are learning to teach. The experiences of men entering the teaching profession as a gender minority demonstrate that some of the difficulties men teachers face when negotiating gendered expectations conflict with their personal aspirations as a teacher.

The second article by Douglas Gosse “Race, Sexual Orientation, Culture and Male Teacher Role Models: ‘Will Any Teacher Do as Long as They Are Good?’” points to the need to consider how men can offer diverse perspectives to students. His argument for men teachers over any teacher “as long as they are good” questions “ideological feminists” flattening the diversity of men to the extent that it becomes difficult to argue the case for what men teachers might bring to the classroom. We appreciate that this positioning may be difficult for some readers, and we hope that the politics of gender and education—as critically important as it is—does not prevent us from addressing the broader objective of meeting the educational needs of students in a way that celebrates diversity across gender, race, sexuality, and other taxonomies of difference.

“Toward a Genderful Pedagogy and the Teaching of Masculinity” by Shaun Johnson and Brenda R. Weber also propose a closer examination of the diversity of men’s experiences. By exploring the application of a “genderful pedagogy” in a university and elementary school teaching context, the authors interrogate the implications of infusing gender justice perspectives and masculinities as a deliberate pedagogical strategy. This too, we believe, pushes the reader to consider the impact of reflective and reflexive teaching practice through a gendered lens in the service of quality teaching and learning.

The fourth article in this collection, “‘Let’s Hear it for the Men’: A Men’s Studies Curriculum in the School System” by Andrew Kitchenham and Gordon Weber documents a collaboration between an academic and a school teacher who share a common goal to support young men’s education by refocusing the curriculum so that it may reach academically disengaged male learners. While some may argue that men’s perspectives already dominate curriculum design in schools, the process of articulating what a Men’s Studies course for boys and young men might include offers significant insight into the null curriculum (see Eisner, 1994) regarding the lives of boys and young men.

The final contribution to this collection, “Dads as Teachers: Exploring Duality of Roles in the New Zealand Context” by Stephanie White, addresses the public call for more male role models for boys and the need for more men teachers by looking to the very place where many men, regardless of various gender expectations and stereotypes, have direct experience with the education of children—fatherhood. It is important to understand here that this is not to suggest that only men with children can mentor, or that fathers make better teachers. White’s argument suggests that in our quest for more men

teachers and role models we would do well to consider the rich experience that fatherhood offers—it's a pretty good place to start when faced with a shortage of men entering the teaching profession. We believe that White's research offers a clear example of how various tensions and contradictions regarding men and teaching can lead us to greater clarity and alternative approaches, and can even point us to models that have been with us all along.

This special issue came together because of the commitment of numerous scholars and educators. When the idea of a *JMS* theme issue on Men and Teaching was originally suggested, a number of people came forward and volunteered to serve as Editors and Associate Editors. At first, all of us were excited by the emergence of a concentrated community of academics and practitioners dedicated to the issue of Men and Teaching. We soon discovered that as a group we offered rich personal and intellectual experiences with a variety of perspectives that each of us brought to our common concern. As Guest Editors attempting to present the diversity of debate regarding men and teaching we had to confront the tension between our own investment in the area, and the various other perspectives regarding men and teaching and boys and schooling. This may seem like an over dramatization of a simple difference of opinion—any topic should encourage healthy, constructive, and hearty disagreement. However, when it comes to men and teaching, and boys and schooling more specifically, we yearn for theories and explanations that, deep inside us, speak to our own personal experience with schooling and teaching. This intimate connection to the topic can create a defensive barrier when it comes to giving equal value to alternative ways of understanding the issues.

Given this context, we appreciate that most readers will inevitably gravitate to the articles in this volume that take on their preferred approach. We are not arguing for petting the cat backwards. This special issue does not aim to convince readers that one approach is better than the other, or even that all views are equal. However, it is too easy to settle for simplistic binaries while ignoring the complex details. As Guest Editors, we want to challenge readers to resist the temptation to dismiss oppositional views that cause personal, emotional, and political friction. We admit that this is not easy to do. The key is to recognize that our goal should be to strengthen our understanding of men and teaching by focusing our critical lens on the points of contrast between the articles in this collection rather than investing in arguments that aim exclusively to undercut the perceived threat of oppositional views.

While we are not the first to consider men and teaching as a topic for scholarly debate (Brannen & Moss, 2002; King, 1998; Levine, 1993; Sargent, 2001; Williams, 1991), we feel that we have begun to point to the messiness of this intersection, not as something that needs to be sorted, solved, or fixed in a prescriptive way, but as a complex concern for educators and the children and families they teach. We have found that while resisting the temptation of simplicity and the comfort of what we know well was hard work, we are happy to discover that our curiosity is strengthened from the experience. We hope that readers welcome this complexity as a vehicle toward greater understanding, change, and gender equity for the adults, children and families we teach.

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