

Superheroes v demons: Constructing identities of male student teachers in the early years

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Abstract

This article presents research undertaken among male teachers and it explores their perceptions and experiences of working in early years contexts. It examines prevalent, contrary discourses and their impact on the construction of male teachers' identities. Public discourses in relation to male teachers reveal contradictions and ambiguities (Carrington et al., 2008). Men are conscious that many conflicting identities are constructed for them – from 'Superhero' to 'Demon'. According to these data, male teachers seem unsure of who they are and indeed of who they should be within a school context. This uncertainty is, in part, a result of their awareness that various groups have the power to construct their identities in different ways. This article will discuss different identities constructed by, and for male teachers, and will argue that individuals may be limited as far as choice is concerned because of the power structures operating both within the primary school institution and in broader society.

Keywords: Gender; identities; early years; male teachers

Constructing identities

The postmodern concept of identity asserts that there is a 'crisis of identity' which is undermining the security of both groups and individuals. Identities are neither fixed, stable nor permanent, but change according to the variety of cultural systems which present themselves, thus assuming different identities at different times. As Hall (1992) puts it, 'we are confronted by a bewildering, fleeting multiplicity of possible identities, any one of which we could identify with, at least temporarily' (277).

Individuals operate across a range of different contexts, or 'fields' (Bourdieu, 1984) such as family, work and so on. Operating within these very different contexts may draw from us a range of different identities. We are governed by certain social expectations, which result in us positioning ourselves, or being positioned according to the 'fields' of operation. Not only are we faced with a multiplicity of identities, but some may conflict and result in tensions for the individual (Curry-Johnson, 1995). There would appear to be ambiguity and often discomfort, not only over whom, but also, over how, to be.

This is of particular relevance to any discussion of masculinities which depend upon culture and are shaped differently at different times (Berger *et al.*, 1995). So it may be held that what we are currently witnessing in contemporary society is a form of 'hybridised' masculinity, experienced and presented differently according to context. Indeed, Beynon (2002) describes this process as 'nothing less than the emergence of a more fluid, bricolage masculinity, the result of "channel hopping" across versions of the masculine' (6). It is this view which characterises the postmodern man.

Integral to these processes are notions of power. So, practices which produce meaning involve relations of power. Individuals can neither be free from, nor operate outside of the exercise of power (Foucault, 1984). It is diffuse, interwoven into society, operates through networks and allows for the exploration of different discourses at different times. We are subject to certain discourses and have a certain amount of agency in deciding not only whether or not we will take them up, but also where exactly we will position ourselves. Importantly, however, agency is constrained by the operation of various factors. Power structures operating within relations of class and gender, for example, may mean individuals are not empowered to exercise choice over the discourses which eventually position them (Woodward, 2001, 39). This article examines identity construction as it relates to primary male student teachers.

A small scale research project was undertaken to investigate male student teachers' perceptions and experiences of working in the early years of schooling. Semistructured interviews were held with eighteen male students from both undergraduate and postgraduate courses and reflecting a range of ages and ethnicities. A poststructuralist approach was taken, as it concerned the production of identities, and how identities change within various contexts (Kenway, 1994). Approaching research from this position enabled reflection on multiple gendered practices in schools.

A key concept drawn from post-structuralism is discourse and this research focuses on how institutions and those working within them are affected and produced by wider ideological discourses. A poststructuralist approach may facilitate an understanding of meaning-making processes and connections between local and historical discourses (Mauthner & Hey, 1999). Within the context of the primary school and in wider society, the argument that more male teachers are needed is accepted as common sense. Yet there appears to be no clear explanation of why this should be so.

The male primary teacher: Male teachers constructing identities

In this particular study, male student teachers struggled to articulate what the identity of the male teacher should be. However it became clear that there are several key discourses working together which impact on the identity construction of male teachers (Martino & Berrill, 2003). In discussion, students drew upon the views of 'wider society', parents and teachers. Such fragmentation within society has a direct impact on the primary school environment. Within this context male teachers are experiencing uncertainty about the multiple identities which they could take on. They are aware of competing discourses which open up both freedom and anxiety, and in so doing spawn confusion (Beynon, 2002). The following key issues emerged from this study.

Not 'real men'

Students are aware that the weight of society's views on men working with young children is negative: 'It's not acceptable for a man ... and it's also perceived to be a soft option.' Implicit in this are notions of primary teaching as 'women's work'. This is 'soft', female work, not in keeping

with the 'harder' more 'macho' types of career. Immediately then, we see that men in primary teaching have their masculinity called into question (Skelton, 2003). This appears to operate on a continuum. This end is perhaps the most innocuous, expressing the view that because they are in a feminised profession, they are not quite 'real men'.

However several men were disparaging in their comments on certain male teachers they observed and constructed themselves as 'other' in relation to them:

The other two male teachers were ... wallpaper and didn't join the staffroom conversations.
They had no presence ...

Implicit in this view is the notion of other male teachers as not being truly male (i.e. homosexual slurs) and student teachers were anxious to distance themselves from them. This male teacher is characterised as 'wet', 'naive' and 'passive'. Within the structure of binary opposition, these men display traditionally female stereotyped characteristics.

Sexual predators

At the other end of the continuum, men are aware of more serious scrutiny pertaining to their motivation and their masculinity. They are aware of accusations that may be levelled against them resulting in 'moral panic' arising within the public discourse. One student comments:

[There are] ... concerns about paedophilia ... If you see males hugging small children ... you immediately think the worst.

In citing fear of accusation as a reason for lack of men in this area, he implicitly acknowledges that all men who enter the profession have to deal with suspicion (Martino & Berrill, 2003) and are perceived as 'high risk' (McWilliam & Jones, 2005; Smedley, 2007).

Male role models

All men thought there should be more men working in primary education and all cited the need for role models as a main reason. There did not, however, appear to be much clarity as to what a male role model was, reflecting lack of clarity within the public discourse (Bricheno & Thornton, 2007). The discourse of 'common sense' comes into play, that is, it is self-evident that male teachers are a 'good thing'. Some students suggested that male role models are a 'good thing', simply because they are not female, so drawing upon notions of women as 'other'. Many cite balance as a reason for introducing more male role models, but again few could articulate why that would be beneficial.

Students were aware of parents in particular, expressing preconceptions of the male teacher as firm disciplinarian: 'They think I'm a disciplinarian ... They say their children need discipline.' Male teachers are often concentrated in the upper years of primary teaching and are frequently perceived to be the main source of discipline (Beynon, 1989). In this way they attempt to mirror types of conventional masculinity (Connell, 2005). By locating themselves within wider discourses of heterosexuality and the technical/rational they come closest to this. However, Skelton (2001) suggests that 'men primary teachers present themselves as "properly masculine" according to the construction of a proper masculinity in the school' (138). The limited range of masculinities within most primary schools, however, may mean that this construction may be more fluid and less liable to the sorts of pressure on men found in workplaces outside the school.

It appears that all male students were open to stereotyping simply by virtue of being male. By definition this process is unthinking, identities being constructed for male teachers which may be far removed from the kinds of characteristics which they do, in fact, exhibit.

Potential manager

There appears to be a direct link between the views of these specific groups and the career aspirations that men have. The following student is commenting on the responses he has had to his work in the primary school:

I don't know if I'll stay because you get some very funny reactions. I won't get out of teaching but will get out of teaching front line ... looking into deputy headship or headship would be an option for me.

Certain discourses may be catalysts for removing male teachers from the classroom situation, propelling them towards roles seen as more fitting for men. Many male students viewed management positions as the obvious end point for their careers and were making strategic decisions to enter fast-track, and secure better paid managerial positions. Furthermore, certain discourse practices would appear to facilitate this process as networks firmly grounded in male bonding processes appeared to operate (Simpson, 1996; Connell, 2004). All male students attributed significance to the relationships they had with other male teachers, citing many examples of conversations about their future careers. Men did, it seems, want promotion and in many instances were told by male heads and deputies that they would '*get headships soon*'. This reflects practices of 'bands of brothers' who operate to promote men in the workplace (Lorber, 1984). In addition, male student teachers are typically pushed to the upper years of teaching.

Clearly, the forces operating to keep men out of the early years of education are strong, as are the forces to give them positions of management. The operation of power here may work for and against male teachers. Male power exists as a collective practice, men supporting other men to a high degree so facilitating the glass elevator concept (Martin, 1991). Discourses constructing dominant and subordinate groups of men are at work here and impact on the construction of the appropriate male teacher.

Multiple identities

Discourses both construct individuals and impact on their practices. In this research, male primary teachers have been positioned as the following by female teachers, parents and children:

- Disciplinarian, ogre, horrible monster
- Janitor, caretaker, removal man, action man
- Ofsted Inspector, Santa, headteacher
- Sex-object, flirt, potential paedophile
- Friend, sensitive carer, father-figure, older brother, son
- Technology, maths or sports expert
- Talisman, hero.

Within the school context multiple identities are constructed for male primary teachers, many of which are conflicting. Outside the school environment these same conflicts are evidenced in wider ideological discourses which construct men as weak, predatory or even desirable role models. Male teachers may be variously positioned as superheroes or demons. The men in my study were acutely aware of these discursive terms and deeply self-conscious as a result. They embarked on a process of capitalising on the positive discourses and working against the negative ones. They positioned themselves accordingly, policing themselves as conscientiously as they were policed by others and were aware of being constantly 'under surveillance' (Foucault, 1982). Within this context, male primary teachers are clearly experiencing some uncertainty about the multiple identities which they could inhabit. They may experience '*an acute sense of multiplicity*' (Curry-Johnson, 1995, 222). They are aware of competing discourses which open

up both freedom and anxiety and can result in a lack of confidence about who they should be within this environment (Beynon, 2002). Nevertheless, men, as partakers of the patriarchal dividend, enjoy many benefits (Connell, 2004). As such they learn to take on various identities which will buy them time in the short term and success for the future.

Conclusion

This short account has attempted to illuminate the different identities constructed by and for male student teachers using recent data from a small-scale investigation. In this study male teachers are positioned by wider ideological discourses and institutional practices from which it is difficult for them to escape as they take up positions and are positioned within certain constraints (Skeggs, 2002). Discourses of power and identity impact on the microcosm of the primary school where issues regarding gender privilege, and what is under threat, occur.

For many male student teachers, their initial period within the primary school can be fraught with uncertainty and discomfort as they become aware of the 'demon/superhero' discourses. For them, a key factor in this process of establishing identity is that of identification, whereby male teachers position themselves in places constructed by discourses. There is, however, a limit to agency as they may be positioned in certain ways by discourses over which they have no control (Woodward, 2001). Discourses of male teachers as 'high risk', for example, cannot be ignored and men working with young children must somehow accommodate the fact such discourses exist. Nevertheless, insecurity for men appears to be relatively short-lived, in part because of systems of power.

The trajectory of the male teacher from student to head teacher is characterised by an awareness of power shifting between individuals, cutting across hierarchies and short-circuiting established strata of authority (Foucault, 1984). So power may be viewed as both positive and negative, as either constraining or enabling according to varying contexts and dominant or subordinate groups. It is difficult to see how selection of identity can work devoid of power. A strong, subtle account of power is needed in terms of those who can mobilise and obtain.

Constructing identity, then, is shot through with inequality for various groups of people. Many have an extremely limited set of options due to imbalances of power. Male student teachers may be subordinate to female teachers in terms of status for a relatively short time. Within the UK primary school numbers of male head teachers remain vastly disproportionate. Currently the chances of becoming a head teacher are one in four for men and for women, one in thirteen. As partakers of the patriarchal dividend (Connell, 2004) the male teacher's position is necessarily strengthened as he 'reads' what he should be and cashes in the dividend. In general, the new reflexivity for men means they can pick from a range of identities. In the context of the primary school then, the male teacher can ditch the 'demon' and develop inspirational projects of becoming the 'superhero' head.

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