Men Missing from the PK-12 Classroom—A Discussion of Research-Based Explanations

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Both academic studies and the popular press have reported the lack of male teachers in the K-12 teaching force, both in the United States and in much of the world. The number of male teachers in the United States has declined precipitously since the early 20th century. This underrepresentation is particularly highest among primary school teachers and more so among African-American males. This article discusses some of the reasons for this circumstance and describes programs and proposals designed to rectify the situation.

In 2006, the National Education Association noted that the number of males teaching in public school classrooms had fallen to a 40-year low (National Education Association, 2006). The ratio of male to female teachers steadily declined over this same period. The number of male teachers decreased precipitously at every level of the nation's PK-12 teaching pool. Additionally, since there is a higher concentration of male teachers in secondary education, the dearth of male teachers at the PK-8 level seems even more ominous. Compounding this situation is the lack of minority male teachers, especially in elementary education. In the spring of 2011, U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, noting that less than 2% of the American teaching workforce consists of African-American males, launched an initiative to increase their number by 80,000 before the end of 2015 (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). Both the popular press and government officials have noted the lack of male teachers as a worldwide phenomenon (Cushman, 2007).

This paper explores conjectural reasons for this situation. The literature indicates that there is a multifaceted basis for this condition. Some of this basis is historical in nature, while other elements are based in sociological and gender behavior aspects. An analysis of the percentage of male teachers in United States public schools has signified a decrease over the last five decades (Figure 1) extraordinary, studies have indicated that the female teacher predominance phenomenon has long been considered a construct of 20th century education.

Historical View

Indeed, the stage for the female domination of the teacher workforce began in the late 19th century, encouraged by such educators as Horace Mann who opined, "Teaching has long been women's work…Women are better suited than men to begin the first work of the Temple of Education" (cited in Apple, 1985). C. W. Bardeen, in his 1908 essay "Why Teaching Repels Men," noted the early 20th century view that men regarded teaching as work that "usually belittles

a man," even as he acknowledged that male teachers of the time earned salaries commensurate or exceeding other professions typically held by men such as lawyer, physician, or clergyman (Bardeen, 1908).

Bardeen's view was not uncommon; indeed, a number of his contemporaries held a similar opinion (Blount, 2006). By the early 20th century, Mann and Bardeen's viewpoints, along with the onset of the industrialization of the American economy and a higher demand for low- paid teachers to supply public school students (whose ranks had swollen due to the increasing number of compulsory attendance requirements), had resulted in a rapid de-masculinization of the American teaching workforce.

At mid-century, Rogers (1953) found that most male elementary teachers would recommend the career to other men, given their ability to adjust to certain "undesirable" features, such as those related to the presence of males in a workforce dominated by females. Such ideas passed into current thinking about male teachers. These views are common not only in the United States, but also throughout those societies influenced by Western culture (e.g., Azman, 2013; Coulter & Greig, 2008; Drudy, Martin, Woods, & O'Flynn, 2005). While these studies found that males and females were motivated to enter teaching by similar factors, they noted issues in the broader contexts of gender issues, policy-making, and teacher recruitment. As part of a larger phenomenon, these observations on the role of male teachers have certain common characteristics in the framework of social expectations and gender roles in teaching.

Sociological Perspectives

There are several sociological issues contributing to the lack of male teachers. The perception of thin monetary rewards in a teaching career contributes significantly to this situation. Additionally, the low status associated with a teaching career adds to this condition (Cushman, 2005), a phenomenon Doyle and Paludi (1998) note as a likely manifestation of the "pink ghetto," where employment prospects for "pink collar" jobs lends to diminished financial rewards (Howe, 1977).

In their book Men and the classroom: Gender imbalances in teaching, Drudy, Martin, Woods, and O'Flynn (2005) note multiple sociological factors discouraging males from entering a career in teaching, particularly in the primary grades. These factors include an overall devaluation of the teaching profession, a perceived inadequacy of professional standing, and apparent lack of professional control for teachers. These authors found that males are discouraged by a lack of control, the bureaucratic nature of education, and by the dearth of professional socialization due to the physical separation from peers that teaching typically entails. More so, the lack of upward mobility in a teaching career (as opposed to a career in administration) dissuades males from remaining in the teaching force.

The perceived feminization of primary education also contributes to this problem. This topic has generated tremendous interest as part of an examination of boys' underachievement and the potential role of male teachers in its reversal (Skelton, 2012; Cushman, 2005). Roulston and Mills (2000) noted that male teachers tend to adopt, rather than challenge, practices that reinforce gender stereotypes. Other research findings suggest that social norms regarding occupation may apply more heavily to men than to women (Simpson, 1974).

In modern times, teaching has become a less-respected profession, and that social status, combined with historically low economic opportunities for teachers, contributes to this problem (Cushman, 2005). Males often shy away from teaching due to the feminization of education, especially in the lower grades since, historically, teaching has been a profession for

females. Gender theory holds that males are uncomfortable filling such roles (Martino, 2008). Additionally, the issue of male physical contact with children has an untoward connotation with pedophilia and this stigma keeps some males from entering the teaching profession (Cushman, 2005).

Sociological perspectives also play a role in the dearth of African-American males in the teaching force. African-American students constitute approximately 20% of the public school population, while African-American male teachers constitute approximately 1% of the teaching force. Typical reasons for this situation are related to economic, cultural, and academic factors for African-American males (Lewis, 2006). These factors include lower socioeconomic status, lack of African-American male role models, and barriers to the profession, such as mandated examinations and training for licensure.

In an analysis of programs designed to get more men into teaching, Chmelynski (2006) noted that male teachers from minority groups were rare and that African-American males have unique perceived barriers to teaching careers. For example, Brockenbrough (2012) found that black male teacher perspectives on gender and power in the teaching profession included patriarchal ideology issues, conflicts with female administrators and colleagues, and a desire for more professional interactions with other men in teaching. For minority males, these restraining conditions are exacerbated by the negative experiences many have had with education and other societal institutions (Gordon, 2000).

Gender Differences

Several theoretical explanations have been offered for the disparity in the number of males to females in a primary teaching profession. Some of these explanations are based on the idea that gender differences contribute significantly to the disparity. One such explanation offered is essentialist in nature. This essentialist theory posits that there are biological differences between males and females that form the basis of socialization models that contribute to an inclination by females in the selection of primary education as a career (Francis, 2008; Hansen & Mulholland, 2005). Males often shy away from teaching due to the feminization of education, especially in the lower grades. Gender theory holds that males are uncomfortable filling such roles (Martino, 2008).

Another such explanation suggests a constructivist's view of these gender differences leads to the disparity in the number of males in primary education. This observation suggests that the constructs of masculinity and femininity are active through the processes of "gender performance" or "doing gender," leading men away from a career working with young children. (Hedlin & Aberg, 2013 ; Johnston, Mckeown, & Mcewen, 1999). Thornton (1999) examined initial teacher education programs and noted contradictions in patterns of perceived teacher achievement due to gender differences, indicating differing expectations of male and female teacher performance, and suggesting a degree of inequity or bias against male teachers.

This apparent lack of support is consistent with other research focused on gender effect on males who pursued training in a female-dominated profession. For example, Severiens and ten Dam (2012) found that men training in such professions suffered more from lack of support at home, a perception of poor job opportunities, and a disconnection with their professional training. Additionally, these researchers found that males training in female-dominated professions felt their training was unessential to their economic future. Other studies focusing on gender differences among practicing teachers have confirmed these issues (Huang & Fraser, 2009; González-Morales, Rodríguez, I., & Peiró, 2010). For preservice male primary school teachers, one study found that the subjects were actively discouraged from a career

in teaching by friends and acquaintances that frequently used teasing with homophobic slurs and disparaging commentary centered on lost economic opportunity (Weaver-Hightower, 2011).

Summary of Current Research

Common explanations from the research suggests that gender differences or expected gender roles contribute significantly to the sparse number of male teachers in primary education. Societal expectations are still skewed significantly toward the feminization of education of young children. Preservice teacher training often ignores the issues males face in entering into a teaching career, leaving them unprepared to deal with such problems (Carrington & Skelton, 2003). Additionally, as the number of male teachers continues to decline, there are few role models for male preservice teachers. This situation is significantly worsened in the case of African-American males.

Examination of Current Programs

As a response to the declining number of male teachers in primary education, a number of options have been created designed to ameliorate the situation. Typically, these programs are aimed at specific male populations who would enter into and be retained in the profession. Such schemes tend to have a common trait of support mechanisms designed to aid particular groups, such as career changers, veterans, and minorities. These programs typically consist of non-traditional routes in teacher education designed to increase the number of male teachers.

One such route is the Troops to Teachers program (Defense Activity for Non-Traditional Education Support, 2013). This program was designed to coordinate the transition of service members to a second career in public education as a teacher. The Troops to Teachers program consists of two levels: national and state. The national office was designed to facilitate funding and other logistical issues for those service members interested in this transition. Programs in each state are responsible for teacher certification and employment prospects. Similar programs are in use in other countries (Dermott, 2012). While one report found high satisfaction among principals employing Troops to Teachers program completers (Owings, et al., 2005), due to legislative priorities in the United States this program, its criteria for eligibility, and potential funding are uncertain at the present.

Other such programs also follow alternative routes to certification. These programs include Master of Arts in Teaching programs, where candidates already holding a bachelor's degree in an appropriate content area earn a master's degree in education with teacher certification. Other pathways include temporary licensure programs based on additional training and successful completion of an internship. A common theme in these alternative routes to certification is in their focus on mature students pursuing a career beyond their initial bachelor's degree training (Lerner & Zittleman, 2002). A recent review of such alternative teacher training programs indicated that such alternative schemes were better at attracting males and minorities into the teaching workforce (Kabaker, 2012).

Another program established in an attempt to encourage African-American males to a career in elementary education, the "Call Me MISTER" (Mentors Instructing Students Through Effective Role Models; Jones & Jenkins, 2012) or CMM program, was created in 2001. Originating in South Carolina at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), such as Claflin University and Morris College, CMM's original purpose was to increase the number of minority male teachers in elementary school classrooms. In South Carolina, whose population is approximately one-third African American, less than one-half of 1% of the K-6 teaching force teachers was made up of African-American males. In the CMM program, HBCUs that had teacher preparation programs

actively recruited males into their elementary education programs, providing mentoring, enrichment activities, and some financial assistance (Jones & Jenkins, 2012). The program has since expanded to 23 institutions of higher learning in eight states plus the District of Columbia and has graduated over 80 teachers as of 2012 (Jones & Jenkins, 2012, pp, 155-60). In addition, the program has expanded to include a Master of Arts in Teaching program at the middle grades level to provide an opportunity for male career changers to participate in CMM and its programming, increasing the African-American male presence in grades 6-8 in South Carolina.

Implication for Teacher Educators

The precipitous decline in the number of male teachers in K-12 education has been noted in both the research literature and in the popular press. The attention to this problem from both political and educational forces has provided an atmosphere that could lead to changes in the way that society and the education community view the contributions of male teachers in primary education. It is the idea of societal transformation that is part of the discourse behind the recruitment of African-American male teachers in the concept of these teachers as agents of change for African-American male students (Brown, 2012).

Teacher educators must become considerably more aware of the challenges facing male teachers. Faculty serving in teacher education programs are charged with understanding the process of all preservice teachers. Failing to understand the needs of an underrepresented population in the teaching force does the teaching profession and the children that profession serves a great injustice. This understanding should take several forms.

Faculty should be aware of inappropriate societal pressures that conspire to discourage males from teaching. Beyond awareness, teacher educators should be assigned with the responsibility of helping students overcoming these pressures. This point is even more important in the case of African-American males and other underrepresented minorities in the American teaching force. Failing to acknowledge a difference between males and females in their perceptions of teaching and the teaching profession also contributes to pressures, and these strains should be understood and ameliorated by college faculty to promote the profession.

Several ways are suggested to correct this problem. While it is generally acknowledged that male teachers provide appropriate mentorship for boys, it is also appropriate that these pre-service male teachers have appropriate role models and mentors. Such a suggestion requires action on the part of teacher educators' placement and exposure to male professional educators in the classroom. Additional resources may also be necessary for preservice male teachers, especially those undergoing a career change. Acclimation to a professional teaching setting should be dependent on the needs of the preservice teacher as well as their intended teaching environment.

It is also appropriate for teacher educators to become fully responsive to the challenges facing male teachers. This awareness comes through both education of college faculty and continued investigation by teacher education researchers. Accordingly, continued study in this area is needed to provide much-needed understanding and direction. Such research should focus on models to determine the effectiveness of recruitment efforts of potential male teachers. Additional studies should focus on the educational system, societal issues, and exemplars of successful programs producing male teachers. Examples of successful teacher education programs along with case studies and other research on successful male teachers and the schools and education systems that employ them will also provide models appropriate for teacher educators and pre-service male teachers.

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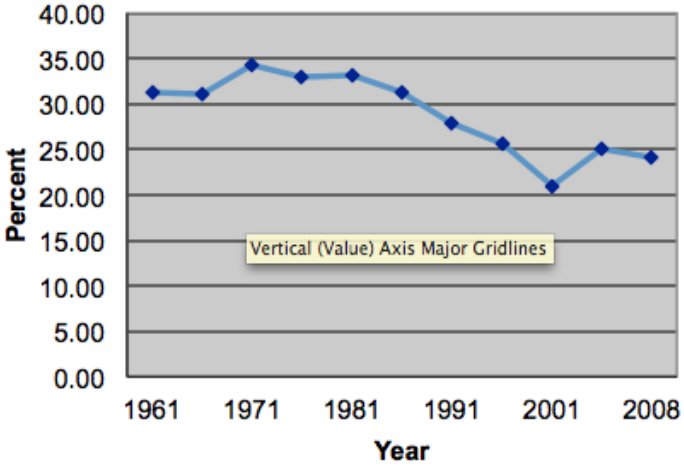
Figures

Figure 1

Percent of Male Teachers in Public Schools



Synder and Dillow (2012)