Is there a need for more male teachers?

Claire Moors

Before starting my degree I applied for the Student Associate Scheme (SAS) to gain more experience in the classroom working with children. I was disappointed to find that I had been excluded from applying for support because I was not a male. The letter of rejection stated that there was a drive by the government to encourage more males into the teaching sector and for this reason they were offering their first places to students who met this criterion. This study therefore explores and examines the issue around the recruitment of more male teachers in primary schools and concludes that the evidence does not support the exclusion of females from the SAS scheme on gender grounds.

Keywords: Feminisation, Role Models, Male Teachers, Behaviour, Subject Areas and Societal Influence.

Introduction

Based on my limited experience and perception that there is a governmental and institutional drive to actively recruit male teachers, this assignment examines the reasons behind this initiative. To understand the issues surrounding this area of education and draw any conclusions, it is necessary to examine theories and research that relate to and impact on what is known about relevant gender issues, role models and the behavioural responses of boys and girls. These areas must also be set within a historical context and compared against actual data in respect of gender divides in schools. Starting from the premise that this area of education has been problematic, it can be evidenced that over the course of the last 100 years, women have always dominated primary education and there has never been anything even close to parity in relation to the proportion of women as opposed to men in primary teaching (Thornton and Bricheno, 2006). If this is the case, why only now has there been such concern for more male teachers? Headlines like, ‘Is a lack of male teachers forcing boys to underachieve’ (cited in Thornton and Bricheno, 2006) and ‘More role models wanted’ (Berliner, 2004), coupled with league tables that evidence that girls as a group have surpassed boys in terms of academic achievement, has caused much public concern and debate. Governmental response has been a drive to recruit more male teachers (Thornton and Bricheno, 2006).

Many commentators have argued that the impact on the underachievement of boys has been caused by the feminisation of teaching and the low number of males choosing a profession in primary or nursery education. According to the Guardian, employing more men into primary school teaching has to become a ‘national priority’ (Williams, 2002). Furthermore, in 2000, Estelle Morris, the Schools Minister, announced that the Government ‘wants to see more male applicants becoming primary school teachers as boys benefit from positive role models’
(Wadsworth, 2002, p41). The chief executive for the Teacher Training Agency (TTA) (1999; cited in Carrington et al, 2008) added that not only were boys suffering due to the lack of male role models in the classroom, but those boys being brought up in one-parent families, suffered more.

**Understanding Gender Issues**

When examining gender issues in the education system, it is important to understand the terms ‘masculinity’ and ‘femininity’. At any given time, social, economic and family centred values determine what being male or female means and the expectations placed on them (Drudy et al, 2005). However, there has been an increasing fusion of roles and expectations, and at either end of the spectrum: it is possible for a female to take on male traits and vice versa (Eagly, 1987; cited in Meier-Pesti and Penz, 2008). Conversely, these authors also argue that qualities such as conformity, co-operation and a lack of power are traits often still associated with women and girls. In contrast, this traditional perception of masculinity is often linked to displays of aggressive, assertive, dominant behaviour in men and boys. There would therefore, appear to be a more compelling argument that societal expectations of the role of men and women contributed to the gender of those involved in teaching.

**Historical Context**

Setting these issues within a historical context since the introduction of the Welfare State, Tyack and Strober (1981, cited in Drudy et al, 2005) argue that there has not always been a lack of males in education. Thornton and Bricheno (2006) highlight this as the reason why males outnumbered female teachers in the nineteenth century, when education was not so tightly regulated. Williams (1995) argued that teaching jobs have not always been unattractive to men. Both World Wars created labour shortages and Britain was forced to recruit female labourers to sustain the economy (Thornton and Bricheno, 2006). The 1918 Education Act that was introduced after the First World War resulted in the restoration of the pre-war proportions of men and women. It did so by legislating that all children must attend school until the age of fourteen and, consequentially, there was a need to recruit more teachers.

However, the 1944 Education Act led to a major change in respect of the number of males in the teaching profession. This Act led to the abolition of Elementary schools and introduced a tripartite system of Grammar, Secondary and Technical schools. Whereas Elementary schools had only catered for all children up to the age of fourteen years, the new system made it compulsory for children to attend a Primary school until the age of eleven and then, depending on the results of the eleven plus examination, complete their education to the age of fifteen at one of these three new education establishments (Thornton and Bricheno, 2006).

**Gender Differences**

Following the introduction of this legislation, there was a rapid decline in the number of males seeking to enter primary education. Research showed that men preferred to teach children who were of secondary school age and also to teach a subject area of their choice. It was identified that being able to teach their own subject was a strong motivator for them to teach in secondary rather than primary schools. Further, this choice was seen as a higher priority for men than it was women (Thornton and Bricheno, 2006).
Subject Areas
Following the introduction of the 1988 Education Reform Act, where it was made compulsory for teachers to follow the National Curriculum, the number of male teachers fell below 20%. Once again, the lack of choice over teaching subject areas in primary education was seen as a significant reason for this (Drudy et al, 2005). Ashley and Lee (2003) support the argument that a lack of choice is a significant factor, particularly those subject areas often associated with masculinity. Men are more attracted to secondary education as they have a choice of subject area they wish to teach. It will be shown later in this article that women are more attracted to primary education on nurturing grounds. (see Figure 1).

Riddell and Tett (2006) found (illustrated in Figure 1) that men outnumber women in the subject areas of Geography, History, Computing Studies, Chemistry, Physics and Technical Education, whereas women dominate subjects such as Home Economics, English, Music, Biology and Art. Morgan and Lynch (1995; cited in Drudy et al 2005) argue that men and women directly choose the subjects they teach because of societal expectations and the stereotypes that surround these norms. The corresponding breakdown of girls and boys studying particular subjects is almost a mirror image of the gender of the staff working in those areas (Riddell and Tett, 2006).

Whereas this can be linked to issues around ‘role models’ (discussed later in this article), there is evidence that this is related to expected stereotypical gender roles; boys preferring to being taught by males but also having a perceived expectation that they should choose subject areas that reflect their masculinity. Morgan and Lynch (1995, cited in Drudy et al, 2005) argue that the differences in subject areas between girls and boys relate directly to the central issue of stereotyping in subject choice. This implies that there could be ‘a continuous loop’ with boys and girls continually studying subject areas stereotypically assigned to them. However, more recent studies show that this balance is shifting, with girls undertaking studies in subject areas that were historically and stereotypically viewed as the domain of boys however, there is no evidence that boys are studying subjects historically associated with girls (Riddell and Tett, 2006).

Figure 1: Secondary school teachers; main subject taught by gender (2003)

![Figure 1](image_url)
There would therefore appear to be a direct correlation throughout the history of post welfare state teaching directly linking the choice of subject areas to gender. This has resulted in many males either leaving the profession or not considering it as a suitable career; this has contributed significantly to the feminisation of teaching. Therefore, not only have societal expectations of the role of men and women contributed to the feminisation of teaching, but there would seem to be a compelling argument that historical events have also contributed to shaping society and culture.

**Role Models**

The concept of male teachers acting as ‘role models’ for boys has gathered support and momentum in recent years and has been a key driver for successive governments, through the Training and Development Agency (TDA), to try and recruit more men into primary teaching. In 2001-2002, a record low of 1,500 men applied for initial teacher training courses in primary education (Lipsett, 2009). Strategic educationalists argue that the presence of male role models in primary classrooms will lead to an improvement in academic achievement and a reduction in anti-learning and antisocial behaviour. Furthermore, it is argued that boys need role models in primary schools because they often lack father figures in the home environment who they can observe, imitate and identify with, as they develop their identities (Hutchings et al, 2008). It could be argued that this policy treats the symptoms of failure and not the causes. In today’s society almost a half of all marriages end in divorce and it is now common place for fathers to be absent for much of their children’s lives (Thornton and Bricheno, 2006). This contradicts research conducted about the absence of fathers during both World Wars (Drudy et al, 2005).

Carrington and Skelton (2003), suggest that role models are those who possess the qualities that people would like to see in themselves and consequently, inspire others to be like them. They are vital in the process of socialisation even though they can portray a number of stereotypical behaviours (Carrington and Skelton, 2003). Children usually identify people as role models because they share certain characteristics with this person (Thornton and Bricheno, 2006). Heroes and heroines are often thought of as children’s role models because of their distinctive strengths and positive personalities. Many central characters in fictitious stories become children’s role models because they rise above their own negative traits and overcome personal difficulties which inspire and capture the imagination of children. This inspires them to be like their gender specific hero or heroine (Singh, 2003).

Research in this particular area is complex, Hutchings et al (2008) carried out a study to establish whether children see their teachers as role models; 33% of girls and 13% of boys identified their teachers as one of their role models. This research does not, however, identify whether these results are because of a lack of male teachers or because of cultural and societal expectations. Carrington and Skelton (2003, cited in Carrington and Mcphee, 2008) and Thornton and Bricheno’s (2006) studies identified that children relate better to teachers of the same gender as themselves. Carrington and Skelton (2003) found that matching young children and their teachers by gender makes little impact on their educational attainment but does have positive effects on the child’s experience of school. This is often referred to as ‘the hidden curriculum and a number of researchers and theorists believe that male teachers behave differently with a different style of teaching that lends itself better to teaching and educating boys.
Gender Approaches to Teaching
Ashley and Lee (2003; cited in Francis et al 2008) and Carrington and Skelton (2003), believe that male teachers have a different approach to teaching that benefits boys’ learning. In spite of this, there are no clear discussions or documents that state how male teachers should conduct themselves in the classroom or the form of ‘acceptable masculinity’ that they are supposed to present as a ‘model’ or ‘teach’ to boys.

A contrary view is taken by Lahelma (2000; cited in Francis et al 2008) who argues that the greatest impact on learning is individual teaching ability and not their gender. Ashley and Lee (2003; cited in Francis et al 2008) and Drudy et al (2005) agree with this statement, adding that at present there is no evidence to suggest that male teachers adopt different behaviours and pedagogies in the classroom compared to strategies implemented by their female counterparts.

Pupil Gender Relationships
Another reason why it is cited that there is a drive to increase the number of males into the classroom is so that boys can have positive role models to help improve behaviour levels. The Elton report (1989; cited in Thornton and Bricheno) identified that boys tend to demonstrate more disruptive behaviour than girls. More recently, the Longitudinal Study of Young People in Education (LSYPE) (2004; cited in DfES 2007), concluded that there is no gender difference in children’s attitudes towards schools, but boys do make up 80% of permanent exclusions. A study carried out by Mac an Ghaill (1994; cited in Thornton and Bricheno, 2006), concluded that boys considered it socially unacceptable by their peers to participate and engage in academic work. Skelton (2003; cited in Francis et al 2008), found that having male teachers as role models in the classroom could help counter negative attitudes towards school and help raise the standards of boys’ behaviour and achievements. However, Myhill and Jones (2006; cited in DfES 2007) identified that both boys and girls believe that female teachers treat boys’ behaviour more severely than that of girls. They go onto argue that an explanation as to why boys have lower academic achievements than girls is because teachers have low expectations of them.

The brain structure of boys, their educational needs and learning styles are very different from girls and this might explain why they could benefit from male teachers (Thornton and Bricheno, 2006). Condie et al (2006; cited in Carrington and Mcphee 2008) argues that male teachers are more likely then female colleagues to plan lessons that develop more appropriate, appealing and effective learning experiences for boys. They suggest that boys benefit from a more ‘hands-on’ and experimental approach to their learning whereas girls respond better to a ‘chalk and talk’ method.

The Workforce Gender Divide
Men only make up 7% of the workforce in primary school in comparison to secondary schools where the figure is 43% (Riddell and Tett, 2006). (See Figure 2).
As Ashley and Lee (2003); identified in their research that the main difference between primary teaching and secondary teaching is that the primary school teacher’s first concern is for the child’s welfare and rounded development as a human being. In secondary schools, however, teachers place more emphasis on teaching the curriculum and imparting knowledge of their subject to the pupil. This, they conclude, is why primary school teaching can be classified as more of a caring profession than is evident in secondary schools. ‘The study of school leavers’ and student teachers’ perceptions of teaching (Lynch, 1997; cited in Drudy et al 2005) interviewed final year school pupils and questioned them on the type of courses they wanted to study in higher education. 1,049 students participated in this study; 418 male and 631 female. The results identified that there was a major gender difference among those opting for primary teaching. Only two males compared to 55 females gave their first choice as a primary school teacher. Furthermore, the study showed that boys predominantly chose courses in technology, computers, science and trade; careers associated with masculinity. Of note was the fact that the study highlighted that these gender differences were also found in respect of other caring professions. 86% of the girls who participated in the study chose a caring profession compared to only 14% of boys. In addition, the study identified that if males did choose a career in teaching, it was more likely to be in secondary schools.

This study really highlights the divide between technical and caring professions and how they appear to coincide with the stereotypical gender divide.

**Socialisation**

A number of theorists believe that primary education has been dominated by females because they have been socialised into teaching this age group as they feel that there is a close link with ‘homemaking’ responsibilities emanating from societal influences (Thornton and Bricheno, 2006). Working with young children is often associated with nurturing and having a caring personality; consequently this has made primary teaching often viewed as a
characteristically female domain, not only by the general public, but also by potential recruits and practising teachers (Carrington and Mcphee 2008).

As primary teachers are predominantly female it has become assumed that the work of teachers must be ‘founded on stereotypical traits such as having patience and being caring and therefore only become accessible to non-hegemonic subordinate males’ (Drudy et al 2005). Byrne (1978, cited in Delyon and Widdowson, 1989), develops the argument and states that teaching children has been regarded as ‘women’s work’ for so long that it has become a ‘natural occupation’ for them. Other theorists and researchers, including Kath Aspinwall and Mary Jane Drummond (1989; cited in Drudy et al, 2005), agree with Byrne, and claim that teaching is ‘doing what comes naturally to women’ and they have more suitable traits to be able fulfil the role of a primary school teacher.

If this is the case, it raises the question that if it is natural for women to teach young children, is it unnatural for men? Thornton and Bricheno (2006) dispute this, arguing that teaching is professional and intellectual work suited to both males and females who undertake the necessary training and who possess the correct personal skills and attitudes. Smale (2001; cited in Wadsworth 2002) support this argument and makes the point that ‘fathers have always been involved with the upbringing of their children and are generally responsive and sensitive to their needs’. Smale concludes that up to 36% of fathers take dual responsibilities for the care of their children as well as carrying out household tasks; this has not changed the way men or society perceive the role of the teaching profession. Ashley and Lee (2003) suggest that this is because even though men contribute to the ‘up bringing’ and caring of their children, the nature and type of the care between the home and the school environment is completely different. Teachers care about the facilitation of the child’s learning as well as the factors that affect this and take place outside the classroom. It is a duty of care that requires practices which are professionally, not parentally, determined.

Thornton and Bricheno (2006) highlight that teaching is not mothering or caring in a parental way, it has more to do with the teaching profession being feminised over a number of years and such labelling is likely to deter men from teaching and may explain their absence in the current day. Sargent (2001; cited in Skelton, 2008) explains that men often reject teaching as a suitable career because of the interrelationship between (hegemonic) gender and (hetero) sexuality. For example, an interest in working with children can be associated with the ‘feminine’ and ‘womanhood’; a man taking interest can be therefore thought of as a ‘female-male’. Even in today’s society, people hold views that men who teach are not real men because ‘real men do not engage in activities that are characterised as feminine activities like working with children’ (Mills 2005; cited in Thornton and Bricheno, 2006 p60).

In spite of this, Thornton and Bricheno (2006) argue that the reason why the sector, particularly within primary schools, has such a high proportion of women is that it allows women to combine child care with the opportunity to pursue a career. Being able to combine these two functions is considered a higher priority for women than it is for men because they are often undertake child care responsibilities.

**Inhibitors for Male Teachers**

It has also been argued that another factor as to why there are fewer male teachers in the primary sector is the suspicion of their motives for wanting to teach this age group. Sargent
highlights that if ‘men do not fit the mould of hegemonic masculinity they are often looked upon with suspicion or even considered dangerous’ (Thornton and Bricheno, 2006). Beckford (2008), a journalist for the Telegraph, reports that aspiring male teachers are being deterred by the stigma of being associated with paedophilia and are therefore more likely to pursue alternative careers. Francis and Skelton (2001; cited in Thornton and Bricheno, 2006), suggest that since the 1980’s child abuse cases have been at the forefront of media and public concern; this has consequently deterred men from becoming teacher. Even though abuse is not gender specific, it is perhaps understandable why so many men have avoided a career in teaching young children if they are classed as ‘suspicious’ before even entering the classroom.

A number of researchers, including Thornton and Bricheno (2006), have also examined the link between entry rates into the teaching profession and job status. They argue that men do not choose to enter teaching because it is often viewed by society as being a low status occupation. Men who were often regarded as the ‘breadwinner’ of the family had to leave teaching and find better-paid jobs in order to support their family. Riddell and Tett (2006) agree, adding that teaching was often thought of as a low status job because during the 1980’s and early 1990’s, when the salaries were low compared to other professions. Acker (1994; cited in Thornton and Bricheno, 2006), presents a feminist argument in that it is not the fact that women are low paid because they are in a teaching profession, rather it is because they are women that they are low paid. Figure 2 highlights, however, that within the teaching profession, males dominate headship roles; such roles attract far higher socio-economic status.

Similarly, research carried out by Thornton (1996; cited in Thornton Bricheno, 2006), identified that males dominate leadership roles and thereby attract significantly higher wages than those of the average teacher. Dolton and Chung (2004; cited in Thornton Bricheno, 2006), state that appropriately qualified men may be financially better off if they chose different career paths. They also calculated that, in comparison to similarly qualified graduates who left university in 2000, men entering primary school teaching would, on average, have earned £67,000 less over a typical lifetime. The study concluded that over a third of men that enter the teaching profession reach the position of a Head Teacher, whereas only 7% of women achieve this status. Even with the introduction of the School Teachers’ Pay and Conditions Act (1991), which resulted in enhanced salaries for teachers, their role still attracts a lower socio-economic status than it should.

**Links to Child Care**

The level of men in child rearing activities would appear to have a significant bearing in this debate. Williams, (1995), claimed that, children raised in families where men participate in child rearing will probably not define masculinity as the opposite of nurturing and emotional expressiveness. With the adoption by men of more domestic roles within the home environment, it would appear that issues within the classroom are now far more complex. There appears to be a more equitable gender divide, with women often being the major ‘breadwinner’ in family settings with men performing the role of ‘househusbands.’ This raises a number of interesting points; in particular, will children who grow up in these environments have different views about men and women in caring roles? Increasingly, same sex partnerships now have to deal with these issues and there has been no research on the impact that these relationships will have on this subject area.
Pupil Performance

Since the 1990’s, the former Teaching Training Education (TTE) and now the Training Development Agency for schools have been actively promoting the need for more male primary teachers in the media, through educationalists and in government department briefing papers (Mills et al, 2004). There have been a number of different initiatives in an attempt to recruit and encourage more men to enrol on initial teacher programs. Policy makers justify these activities on the basis that there is a strong relationship between the feminisation of the teaching profession and the underachievement of boys (Carrington and Mcphee, 2008).

Have boys really suffered because of the resultant lack of male role models and been disadvantaged because they are taught by women teachers? When girls were failing in relation to boys there was no public concern or initiatives put in place to raise their attainment levels. According to Phillips (2005; cited in Thornton and Bricheno, 2006), the main change that has occurred is that a strong focus has been placed on equal opportunities in law and education with higher education becoming available to more women. Feminists would argue that it is not so much a case of boys failing but simply that girls have caught up. It would seem that, instead of attributing the perceived downfalls of the current situation to the fact that there are more female teachers, it may be more appropriate to congratulate them. Many studies support the notion that an achievement or attainment gender gap is present during the years of primary education. However, Tymms (1990; cited in Carrington et al, 2008), argues that girls and boys have very similar attainment levels throughout their primary school careers. He agrees that the average girl out performs the average boy in reading but points out that this difference is typically small.

Research shows that it is more likely that boys will be classed as ‘Gifted’ or ‘Talented’ in subjects such as mathematics and science in comparison to girls. The Millennium cohort study (cited in DfES, 2007) found that many girls are at an advantage when they reach nursery and primary school because parents are more likely to read and sing nursery rhymes with them compared to boys. This helps to give an explanation to why girls are more advanced in English related subjects. Tymms concludes that it is not that boys are underachieving at school but that girls generally have a more positive attitude to school. According to the Department for Education and Skills (DfES, 2007), the gender in Key Stages Three and Four; where more males teach. If this is the case, why is this attributed to the female primary school teacher?

Peterson (1971; cited in Duck, 1977), argues that many girls behave better when they are in school because they physically mature faster than boys; consequently girls will have a more positive attitude to learning. Girls tend to place a higher value on the presentation of their work and spend more time trying to improve what they have produced; they are also more concerned about the opinion of their teachers (MacDonald et al, 1999).

Conclusions

In conclusion, research shows that there are a number of different factors that have to be taken into account when considering whether there is a need to increase the proportion of male teachers within the teaching profession. Many of these factors are inter-related but conversely, the results of a number of studies seem to be at odds with each other.
History shows there have often been a greater proportion of women in the profession and this has been particularly the case in primary education. However, major events like war, the creation of the Welfare State and significant education reform have affected this balance. As the relationships between the home, the work place and child care have become more integrated it is difficult to single out any ‘golden thread.’ There are, however, a number of common themes or areas of agreement. These include the fact that boys do respond to male teachers as role models, subject matter is important for male teachers and societal perceptions of the teaching profession are important. It is also important to note that it is female teachers who have ‘been at the helm’ over the course of the last decade when significant uplifts in educational attainment have been achieved.

On balance, there would seem to be a compelling argument to increase the number of men in the teaching profession, particularly in primary education. This is because within a modern democratic society, it seems only right that should be an equitable balance with the proportion of male teachers reflecting the proportion of boys or young men. Any policy to achieve this aim should focus on attracting and rewarding the right candidates, while at the same time, designing out inhibitors to recruitment. This article shows that these two requirements cannot be achieved in isolation and there would appear to be a need for a raft of integrated initiatives across government departments; not one off policy edicts.

Looking specifically at the policy to exclude a female on the Student Associate Scheme purely on gender grounds (the reason why I chose to examine this area) is difficult to support. While the arguments for positive discrimination are understood by most of society; to exclude females because of a need to increase the quota of male teachers is a difficult policy to support. Education should not only be about achieving important academic aims, it should also be about teaching fairness and advancements that are gained on the grounds of ability.

References


