

# The Shortage of Male Primary School Teachers and the “Not-So-Hidden” Consequences

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## Abstract

*There is little doubt that the male elementary school teacher has become an endangered species across Canada and the rest of the western world. While there is a body of literature that argues this reality does not have negative effects on the student body, this assertion is simply not true. A shortage of male role models in early-years classrooms has negative consequences for female students, and especially for their male classmates. With growing numbers of male students disengaging with primary schooling, it is essential that we utilize strategies to address the underrepresentation of male teachers in elementary school classrooms.*

There is a widespread shortage of male teachers in primary schools across North America. Although a number of people claim that this is not a major issue, this lack of diversity is having negative consequences on young males in primary schools due to a lack of male role models. One solution is affirmative action-style programs that have seen success in other minority underrepresentation situations. Such solutions are important to explore if we hope to change the gender dynamic that currently affects primary schooling in North America.

The call for more male primary teachers is not new, but the number of male teachers in kindergarten to grade eight is currently at an all-time low (Blatz, 2008; Davison & Nelson, 2011; Fox, 2005). Recent media attention has highlighted the problem (Ferguson, 2005; Kersten, 2007; “Why, ‘Sir,’” 2008), but relatively few suggestions have been put forth to solve the predicament, and fewer still have had any visible effect on the situation. Whether one analyzes the statistics in Manitoba, where a mere 4.5% of the people involved with early years education are male (Blatz, 2008, para. 4), or in England, where the England Training and Development Agency For Schools has seen the percentage of male trainees dip to 14% (Szwed, 2010, p. 303), the consistent finding is that there is a shortage of male teachers elementary and middle school classrooms. The debate within the academic world and among educational stakeholders is whether this shortage of males has negative effects on the school system as a whole, and on young male students in particular, especially those in kindergarten to grade eight (Gosse, 2011; Marcus & Vairo, 2006). Although the call for more male teachers is not a new issue, it needs to be answered if we hope to reverse the negative effects of gender inequity.

## Background

It seems logical to assume that students are best served by interacting with a diverse set of teachers who can provide a broad range of models. While having a more equal balance of male and female teachers in primary schooling would have positive effects for female students, the larger beneficiaries would likely be male students (Abraham, 2010). The extent of the problem is evidenced by the fact that the *Globe and Mail* recently published a six-part series titled “Failing Boys,” focusing on the fundamental ways that the current public school system is failing to engage male students (Abraham, 2010). While these results were considered to be fairly surprising to the mainstream public, they did not come as a surprise to many in the world of education (Gosse, 2011). Male students are dropping out at much higher rates than female students (Abraham, 2010; Fox, 2005; Orr, 2011). Evidence that males are falling behind their female counterparts can be found by simply looking on any post-secondary campus in North America, where about 60% of the undergraduate student population is female (Gosse, 2011, p. 117). These numbers are beginning to filter into professional faculties such as law, medicine, and especially education, where male teachers routinely make up about 5-15% of admitted students in primary schooling streams (“A Few,” 2005, p. 47;

Szwed, 2010, p. 303; "Why, 'Sir,'" 2008, p. 10). The fact that falling numbers of male primary school teachers have occurred at the same time as the drop in male students' academic performance may not be coincidental, but is instead causal.

### **Diversity versus Feminist Ideology**

The debate about whether we need more males in early and middle years education has two main poles of thought. Proponents of one side argue that while there may be some fringe benefits (that are not quantifiable) to having more males involved with youth education, as long as a teacher is a good one, the sex of the teacher should not matter (Martino, 2008). However, the majority of recent research supports the opposing position, which claims students need a diverse range of role models in order to achieve their maximum learning potential (Gosse, 2011; Marcus & Vairo, 2006; Szwed, 2010). The logical extension of that position is that an extreme lack of diversity in the sex of primary school teachers will negatively impact the learning environment of all students, especially students who are in need of male role models. Until recently, proponents of the anti-diversity agenda have generally "carried the day," and we are seeing the negative effects in today's young male students.

Opponents of increasing the number of male teachers in early and middle years education often claim that the "pro-diversity" movement has been fuelled by a "re-masculization backlash," and not legitimate research (Martino, 2008, pp. 190-191). These individuals believe that recent gains made by the feminist movement have sparked widespread fear amongst white-males specifically, which has manifested itself in the call for more male primary school teachers. Thus, male teachers are said to be "emerging as central to a project of re-masculinisation" (Martino & Rezai-Rashti, 2010, p. 249) of white-males who are threatened by the perceived feminization of boys (Martino, 2008). These critics also devalue supporters of the call for more male teachers as people whose views are not relevant since they are based on "common-sense assumptions" that are influenced by a "real men" view of masculinity (Martino, 2008, p. 193). They attribute any public support for more male teachers to the "cult of true manhood" (Martino, 2008, p. 198). Proponents of the "any teachers will do, as long as they are good teacher-models" premise use this argument to justify their view that the lack of male teachers in primary schooling is not an important issue.

The anti-diversity position is flawed in three primary ways. The failure to recognize the pivotal link between students observing role models that represent their own identity in a positive manner, and an improvement in educational outcomes, can not be overstated. The anti-diversity argument bases many of its criticisms on literature and views from the 1960 and 1970s. While this response may be appealing on a raw emotional level to some, it does not effectively address 21<sup>st</sup> century realities. Ultimately, the diversity problem in primary school teaching staffs should not be addressed from a confrontational, ideological perspective, but rather a practical problem-solving perspective that places student needs before political agendas.

Role models are an important aspect of education and, consequently, a lack of diversity amongst the role models in a school will hurt students' engagement and performance levels. The value of seeing male role models in academic settings is difficult to quantify, but that does not make it any less important. The same rationale has been used to justify female students seeing female teachers in math and science roles at the secondary level (Gosse, 2011), as well as ethnic minorities seeing themselves represented in the public school system (Branch & Kritsonis, 2006). The benefits of having male role models in primary school classrooms would not be realized by male students alone, but by female students as well. A prime example would be seeing male-female interaction modeled among staff members. Without any male counterbalance to the substantial emphasis on female role models, boys will inevitably begin to link education with femininity, and "if boys associate schooling with femininity the connections might be rather difficult to break" (Orr, 2011, p. 281). To continue to ignore the connection between a lack of male role models and the underperformance of male students in primary schooling would be an unjustified error going forward.

Individuals who believe in the anti-diversity claims base their argument on cultural norms from over thirty years ago, and fail to acknowledge the situation as it exists today. The sexist views of the

1960s and 1970s present a convenient ideological framework that anti-diversity proponents use to further their emotional argument (Martino, 2008). Their strategy to present individuals who seek a more diverse teaching staff as anti-feminist is buoyed by referencing these inflammatory texts; however, it is also irrelevant to the fact that young male students are suffering due to a lack of male role models in primary school classrooms. One example of this strategy is when anti-diversity authors refer to the traditional male administrator vs. female classroom teacher model that was prevalent in past eras, as part of the reason that there are not more males in classroom (Martino, 2008). This myth is based on a completely obsolete premise, as evidenced by the fact that in 2008 Canada had 20,015 administrators, 13,680 of whom were male and 15,335 were female (Gosse, 2011, p. 118). Supporters of the anti-diversity argument seek to justify their criticism of the call for more male teachers through the illogical critique of literature and opinions from a bygone era. This appeal to feminist-based emotions only diverts attention from the important structural problems that are occurring in early and middle years schools across North America.

The idea that any response to the current negative academic climate among male students has to be seen relative to recent feminist movements is a flawed analytical framework. The criticism of recruiting more male primary school teachers is strongly influenced by ideological feminism, which “presents all issues from the point of view of women, and in the process explicitly attacks men as a class” (Gosse, 2011, p. 121). Education is not a “zero-sum” game. Just as the surge in female math and science teachers did not hurt male students (who had already seen themselves represented in such areas), an increase in male primary school teachers would not damage the education received by female students. Hiring a more diverse group of teachers should not be analyzed from a confrontational, ideologically feminist point of view, but rather from the widespread belief within educational circles that a diverse teaching staff helps all learners (Branch & Kritsonis, 2006).

## Solutions

When exploring solutions to the problem of a lack of male primary school teachers, government administrators and educational stakeholders should consider three proposals. The first is an affirmative action-type program similar to those found in other areas of government to address minority underrepresentation. The second is a public informational campaign that would focus attention on male primary school teachers incorrectly being portrayed as inappropriately motivated to work with children, and having homosexual tendencies solely because of their chosen profession. Finally, a practical approach to encouraging more males to enter into early and middle years educational streams would be to offer male-only scholarships that target these specific areas.

An affirmative action-style program, such as ones seen in other publically funded areas, is needed in order to remedy the problem of having too few male role models in primary school classrooms. The most direct comparison that can be made is the concerted effort over the past few decades to place more female math and science teachers into secondary classes (Bae & Smith, 1997). The rationale behind this movement was that females were not meeting their potential in math and science courses at least in part because they were not shown enough positive female role models in math and science roles (Davison & Nelson, 2011). This affirmative action-style program has been largely successful, as proven by the rise in female numbers in math and science courses at post-secondary institutions (Bae & Smith, 1997; Koehler, 2008). Logic dictates that the same sort of reasoning could be used to increase the performance of boys throughout the education system, beginning in primary education. It is not coincidental that in fields where there are relatively few male role models, such as English Language Arts, boys continue to struggle. The connection of male teachers to improving the low literacy rates of male primary school students has been strongly defined (Gosse, 2011). Just as affirmative action policies were used to boost female performance in targeted areas, they should be utilized to fill the gaps that are developing among males and females in the primary school grades.

A focused effort to combat negative stereotypes about male primary school teachers must be made as part of any overall solution to the central problem of a lack of males in classrooms. Studies

are virtually unanimous in their conclusion that one of the main reasons we do not see more male teachers in primary schooling classrooms is the culture of distrust and negative stigmas that surround male interaction with young children ("A Few," 2005; Gosse, 2011; Marcus & Vairo, 2006). Males routinely cite the fact that homophobia-influenced criticism, and immediate suspicion of males in early years classrooms, are strong reasons for the underrepresentation of males within the field. A public education campaign showing the benefits of having a diverse group of role models involved with students of all ages would have positive effects on this mainstream attitude. Another focus of a proposed public education campaign would be the dissemination of the fact that males do not interact with children inappropriately any more than their female counterparts, and the statistics for both sexes reveal the extremely low rates (Gosse, 2011). If educational stakeholders recognize that having more male teachers in primary schools is a worthwhile venture for primary school students, they should be proactive in finding solutions to the problem, instead of hoping that the problem will solve itself.

A final step to draw more males into the primary school teacher profession would be targeted male-only scholarships. Similar scholarships have been utilized to increase the number of women in math and science pursuits such as engineering, and the results have been extremely positive (Koehler, 2008). Males are more extrinsically motivated than females, and cite financial motivation much higher on their lists of reasons to become a teacher than do females (Szwed, 2010). A scholarship program that offers extrinsic benefits in the form of partial tuition payment would be very effective in attracting males to primary school teaching roles.

### Conclusion

While it is not debatable that males are underrepresented in early and middle years schools throughout Canada, the USA, and other Western World countries, educational stakeholders must decide whether they believe this phenomenon is having negative consequences on their young learners. A lack of male role models is considered by some to not be a legitimate concern; however, evidence clearly shows that a diversified teaching staff has positive outcomes for students of all levels and backgrounds. There is equally compelling evidence that our current educational system is failing young male students, and that having male primary school teachers would make a positive difference. We must not delay in utilizing solutions to the problem of underrepresentation of males in early and middle years classrooms. Nothing less than the future of our boys is at stake.

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