

## **Male Teachers and Boys' Achievements:**

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### **Introduction**

In recent years the issue of boys' achievement has risen to the forefront of education's consciousness. The popular message seems to be that boys are not achieving as well as girls - what is to be done? Consequently, much attention has surrounded the issue and a myriad of voices, each perpetuating its own remedy, has been fired forth from academic, media and political bandwagons. One of the more common themes is to argue that a relationship exists between boys' achievement levels and the numbers of male teachers (*Sunday Star Times*, 1 Aug 1999).

As a male, training to enter the primary sector, I am particularly interested in this argument. To borrow Horrocks' (1994) phrase, I write as an "active participant". My interest is not in any detached abstract intellectual discourse. Rather, as a male, I am concerned with the condition of boys in education and wider life, and the consideration of the potential effectiveness of male teachers.

In this paper I argue that the discussion about boys' underachievement is oversimplified, especially the idea that boys are somehow not doing as well as previously and that an increase of male teachers will influence positively their achievement. I will argue that the underlying causes of boys' achievement are complex and problematised in that they are inextricably linked to sociological issues of male identity. After setting an historical context and questioning whether the comparative achievement of boys is a recent phenomenon. I will then consider literacy development as a basis for gender difference in educational achievement. I will also attempt to establish a relationship between literacy, achievement and behavioral patterns from a sociological perspective, using construction of masculinities as a link. I will argue that the failure and success of male achievement is embedded in the (educationally detrimental) constructions of hegemonic masculinities

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(Rout, 1992; Skelton, 1997; Yates 1997). Lastly I will consider the position of the male teacher; to what extent can he (or I for that matter) affect boys' achievement?

### **A historical context**

It is widely acknowledged (O'Neill, 1992:80), that the educational system performs a double role in society. It not only concerns itself with the development of knowledge and skills, but also transmits the attitudes, values, "assumptions and subtleties of class, ethnic and gender relations" of society. Furthermore, it is also acknowledged (Yates, 1997:344), that schooling is a selecting mechanism through which the success of certain members of society is ensured.

Colonial society restricted the female to the role of mother and homemaker, so fewer females attended school in comparison to males. In addition, the subjects available to females were restricted and limited to those which were assumed 'suitable' for the female's role (O'Neill 1992). Feminism sought to readdress the limiting conception of women's roles, theorising it in terms of the "male subjugation of women in patriarchal society" (Horrocks, 1994:9). Policies and funding were introduced to improve female retention and achievement in education. Research became concerned with female development and their pedagogical needs (Yates, 1997:338). Increasing female achievement illuminated the achievement of boys. However the assumption that females were at an educational disadvantage has become replaced by the awareness of an emerging decline in male achievement.

Caution should be exercised in any temptation to blame either feminism or the increased focus on girls' achievement for the state of boys' achievement. It appears that boys' underachievement is not a recent phenomenon. According to Rathgen (1998:5), "as early as the 1890s girls progressed through the [lower primary years] more quickly than did boys, and more quickly reached the upper primary classes". Moreover, Yates (1997:339), cites a 1977 Minority Report in which males emerge from a variety of criteria, including level of literacy, as the disadvantaged group.

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### **Literacy - cornerstone of achievement?**

In their 1997 study of educational achievement in a New Zealand birth cohort, Fergusson and Horwood conclude that the gender difference in educational achievement could not be explained by intelligence, since males and females had similar IQ test scores. “There was no evidence to suggest that males were of a lesser cognitive ability than females” (1997:92). We need to look elsewhere, rather than at limited measures of intelligence alone for the difference.

Performance in literacy and the attitudes towards this provide clues into boys’ achievement levels. The Education Review Office’s publication (1999), on boys’ achievement states that communication skills and knowledge are becoming increasingly important for future employment. Literacy is a subset of communication. Yet, evidence (ERO, 1999; Rathgen, 1998), indicates that boys tend to demonstrate lower levels of achievement in thinking, reading and writing. They also tend to substitute quality for speed. (Perhaps this is related to a ‘culture of competition’ evident in boys – a conjecture only). Moreover, boys tend to lack a more developed command of language necessary for subtle communication. In other words they lack communicative language that is rich in language nuances. Boys’ preference for transactional rather than expressive writing, and non-fictional rather than narrative reading (ERO, 1999), may be indicative of this. Since learning is also inextricably linked to language comprehension and production, I suggest that there is a (subtle) co-relationship between language abilities and the quality of learning.

The reasons for the differences between boys’ and girls’ performance in literacy are varied and complex. I believe that they are inextricably linked to societal, peer and self-perceptions and constructions of masculinity. Whereas girls tend to engage in reading, boys tend to engage in play. Although this is a simplified and stereotypical statement, it supports the argument that if gender is constructed and that boys are “born a male and become a man” (Rout, 1992:171), then, in constructing images of masculinities, boys have learnt to devalue or reject literacy (Rathgen, 1998) since it is seen predominately within, and therefore perceived to belong to, the female domain.

**Achievement and the construction of masculinities.**

The term 'masculinities' derives from feminist sociology which argues against a homogenous monolithic masculine identity. Rather, masculinities are fluid, altering form according to social context and interaction. However some masculinities are perceived to be more powerful or influential than others and there is a hegemonic masculinity that 'speaks' for all males (Rout, 1992). The hegemonic masculinity that pervades New Zealand society is arguably the rugged, rugby watching, beer drinking male. Hegemonic masculinities dominate the male world view and provide a stereotype of masculinity against which other masculinities are typically evaluated.

How does hegemonic masculinity operate in the classroom? How do views of masculinity influence boys' behavior in the classroom and their learning? I have argued that boys, by their middle years, have learnt to devalue or reject literacy and suggest that this is so because reading is associated with the female domain. It follows that boys learn to affirm images of masculinity that deny any feminine precepts. If that is the case, could it be that boys' misbehavior in the classroom is linked to an attempt to affirm their masculinity within a (perceived) predominately female context?

In her study of hegemonic masculinities in primary schools Skelton (1998), argues that the misbehavior of boys toward female teachers in the classroom is a vehicle for them to exercise and rehearse patriarchy. By mistreating female teachers, the boys were rehearsing the patriarchal roles that were reflected in the local community.

If male identity is to a large extent tied up with patriarchy and its rule, as Horrocks (1994) suggests, then this challenges the assumption that introducing male teachers might invert boys' misbehavior and improve male achievement (Biddulph 1997). It is assumed that positive male role models will thereby give boys access to desirable hegemonic masculinities. This is expressed in an idea that

Of key importance to the cultural production of masculine positions are the teachers' masculine styles that are made available to male pupils and with which they may come to identify (Skelton, 1997:364).

It is assumed that male teachers will display a masculinity that is desirable or influential. However, because teaching is still largely perceived as a feminine activity, boys may associate male teachers with that perception and fail to identify the latter's masculinity as hegemonic. Furthermore, since boys experience interaction with teachers in a restricted domain, they may adversely associate the male teacher's behavior only with the schooling domain and not relate it to the wider community. Although male teachers may provide a positive hegemonic masculinity, different gender scripts operate in the wider community. Boys are likely to aspire toward what they perceive as the more dominant masculinity. Thus, societal constructs of hegemonic masculinities may override the limited masculinity of the male teacher.

The commonly held belief that simply increasing the number of male teachers will benefit the achievement of boys simplifies a highly complex issue. I argue that the real issue concerns the relationship between boys' achievement and their misbehaviour and poor attitude to learning. Such self-defeating behaviour and attitudes stems from boys unconscious (or conscious) social positions as 'victims' of gender role prescriptions.

Given such social positioning, to what extent can male teachers help boys achieve? We need to help boys turn around, and think about their thinking (Horrocks, 1994). I suggest that all teachers, both male and female raise consciousness of the masculinities that exist in society and help boys to address and critique the consequences of such hegemonic masculinities, and question their merits. This will require a lot of effort and collaborative aid between the school, society and the media because, as Horrocks (1994:14) asserts, "most of us are driven by powerful, covert forces, and to raise these to consciousness is an enormous task." Unfortunately, unless males develop metacognitive awareness of their behavior they are unlikely to critique and change their behavior from the restrictive hegemonic masculinity of the wider society.

**Conclusion:**

I have addressed the issue of boys' achievement from the perspective of a male training to enter the primary sector, so I approach the issue with a question about the extent that male teachers may benefit boys' achievement. The issue is set within an historical context and demonstrates that gender difference in achievement is not a recent phenomenon. Rather, it is related to two factors: underachievement in literacy, and misbehavior in the classroom, which are grounded in the construction of hegemonic masculinities. Lastly, I have argued that hegemonic masculinities are a key factor in boys' educational achievement since the success or failure of boys is embedded in their construction of what it means to be a male in New Zealand society.

**Bionote**

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