

MALE TEACHERS AND THE “BOY PROBLEM”:
AN ISSUE OF RECUPERATIVE MASCULINITY POLITICS

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ABSTRACT. In this paper, we interrogate the call for more male role models within the context of boys’ education debates in Australia and North America. We explicate links between failing masculinities and this call for more male teachers, arguing that the debate is driven by a “recuperative masculinity politics” committed to addressing the perceived feminization of schooling and its detrimental effect on boys’ education.

LES ENSEIGNANTS DE SEXE MASCULIN ET LE « PROBLÈME DES GARÇONS » :
UNE QUESTION DE POLITIQUE DE LA RÉCUPÉRATION DE LA MASCULINITÉ

RÉSUMÉ. Dans cet article, nous nous penchons sur les appels faits en faveur d’une augmentation du nombre de modèles masculins dans le contexte de l’éducation des garçons en Australie et en Amérique du Nord. Nous tissons des liens entre l’échec de la masculinité et ces appels en faveur de l’augmentation du nombre d’enseignants de sexe masculin, avançant que le débat est alimenté par la « politique de la récupération de la masculinité » qui vise à corriger la féminisation de l’éducation et ses effets nuisibles.

Introduction

In recent times, there have been intensified calls in the media for more male role models in elementary schools. This prescription is often couched within the context of a moral panic regarding failing educational standards for boys relative to girls (see Epstein et al, 1998; Foster et al, 2001; Titus, 2004; Mills, Martino & Lingard, 2004; Skelton, 2003). Driving these debates is a public discourse fueled by media reports claiming that the ongoing “feminization of schooling” is at the heart of the problems that boys are experiencing (Skelton, 2002). In short, suddenly the media has drawn attention to the disproportionate number of female teachers in elementary schools and the decreasing number of men choosing to enter the profession, as if this were a recent phenomenon. Such reports often call for affirmative action to address this gender imbalance. This framing of the problem suggests links between boys’ underachievement and the idea that schools have

become increasingly feminized environments (see Titus, 2004; Ashley, 2003; Skelton, 2002; Johannesson, 2004). Thus, recruitment of male teachers to re-masculinize elementary school education is advocated. This response, it is argued, will ameliorate the emasculating influences of female teachers and result in producing more “boy-friendly schools” (see Martino, 2004, and Lingard et al, 2002, for a critique of this argument; also Martino, Mills & Lingard, 2004).

In this paper, we analyze more closely the nature of these debates. Our approach entails a specific focus on media reports in both Australia and North America; this focus will foreground how such arguments are propelled by certain “common sense” understandings informed by a New Right agenda and, hence, neo-liberal and neo-conservative politics (Apple, 2001; Martino & Berill, 2003). Through undertaking an analysis informed by the work of Lingard & Douglas (1999) and Foucault (1984; 1987), we argue that the calls for more male role models, within the context of the boys’ education debates, occasionally function as a rhetorical ploy or normalizing strategy intended to reassert and re-traditionalize hegemonic masculinities (see Connell, 1995; Lingard, 2003). Thus, in foregrounding the call for more male role models as an issue of recuperative masculinity politics, the media’s (Lingard, 2003) representation of boys and male teachers as “victims” of the increasing feminization of schooling is highlighted. It is the female teacher who (often by implication) is constructed as emasculating boys in schools (see Mills, 2004). Thus, we highlight the significance of the gaps and silences that define the rhetorical space or “surface of emergence” for school boys as particular sorts of victims and failing subjects (Epstein et al, 1998).

In this sense, our aim is to investigate media texts as a site for the emergence of certain “truth claims” (Foucault, 1987; 1984) regarding the need for more male role models in schools. This is not to assume that the media simply transmits ideas about male role models that are implanted in the heads of teachers and the public as passive recipients of culture. Rather, we see the media as an apparatus for the proliferation of certain “masculinity crisis” discourses that are mobilized in the interests of a New Right agenda. Hence, we offer an analysis of the media’s role in defining and understanding the problem of a male teacher shortage.

Games of truth and the boys’ education debate

Foucault (1984) proposes critical inquiry into the historically contingent regimes of normalizing practices within which particular modes of subjectification are circumscribed (see Martino & Pallota-Chiarolli, 2003). This analysis is particularly useful when thinking about the ways in which certain “truths” are produced by the media about boys and the need for more male role models to address their performance and learning difficulties. The media inscribes boys as failing subjects through invoking a discourse of “moral panic”

and blaming the feminization of elementary schools (Titus, 2004; Lingard & Douglas, 1999). However, this resurgent focus on the feminizing influences of female teachers also appears to be linked to the “absent father” and, hence, to the rise of single parent families and alternative or queer subjectivities (Simpson, 1996). For instance, Australian psychologist Biddulph (1995) claims that the “absent father” is at the heart of the problems that boys are experiencing socially and educationally:

Boys with no fathers, or with fathers who are not around much, are much more likely to be violent, to get into trouble, to do poorly in schools, and be a member of a teenage gang in adolescence. (p. 132)

Furthermore, Hoff-Sommers in the United States, (2000) reiterates the need for fathers to help boys become apparently “proper” or “normal” men and stresses the “misery” caused by those in schools who deny what is “natural” for these boys:

It is obvious that a boy wants his father to help him become a man, and belonging to the culture of manhood is important to almost every boy. To impugn his desire to become “one of the boys” is to deny that a boy’s biology determines much of what he prefers and is attracted to. Unfortunately, by denying the nature of boys, education theorists can cause them much misery. (p. 59)

Significantly, as will be demonstrated later, such discourses get co-opted by a particular enunciative regime to produce “truths” about the emasculating influences of women in schools (see Gurian et al, 2001). The production of truths about “the absent father,” and its effect on boys’ developing masculinity and learning in schools, seems to have fuelled the call for more male teachers at a time when increased visibility of single parenthood, alternative family arrangements, and alternative or queer masculinities proliferate within popular culture (see Beynon, 2002; Simpson, 1996; Nicoll, 2001; Kendall & Martino, 2006; Tomsen & Donaldson, 2003).

Foucault’s notion of a subject’s insertion into a “certain game of truth” is useful for discussions about the “moral panic” regarding boys’ schooling:

My problem has always been ... the problem of the relationship between subject and truth. How does the subject enter into a certain game of truth? [F]or example, ... beginning at a certain point in time, madness was considered a problem and the result of a certain number of processes... In fact, there were practices – essentially the major practice of confinement which had been developed at the beginning of the seventeenth century and which had been the condition for the insertion of the mad subject in this game of truth – which sent me back to the problem of institutions of power, much more than to the problem of ideology. So it was that I was led to pose the problem knowledge/power, which is not for me the problem of relationships between subject and games of truth. (1987, pp. 120-21)

What Foucault writes here about madness can be applied to the constitution of men as male role models for boys who emerge as a particular kind of "subject" in post-industrial times (Nayak, 2003) and within a post-feminist backlash involving knowledge power/relations in certain disciplines (Faludi, 1991). For instance, psychological discourse regarding brain sex differences has been used to support the claim that boys and girls essentially have different learning and behavioural orientations, despite medical evidence refuting such claims (see Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998, for a discussion of this medical research). These psychological discourses have been accorded particular significance in media accounts serving the interests of a Right wing and neo-conservative agenda in their promotion and legitimation of certain notions of boyhood (see Mills, 2002; Apple, 2001; Titus, 2004). Inserted into these discourses is a "truth" about the absent father and the emasculating influences of women for boys within the context of elementary schools and single parent families.

These discourses circulate within the culture and have been shown to impact significantly on the sorts of education programs that have been developed to address boys' educational needs (see Lingard, Martino, Mills & Bahr, 2002). For example, Lingard (2003) claims that many schools have "bought into the recuperative masculinist stance, utilizing much of the work of Biddulph and Pollack (*Real Boys*) as a justification for particular policies and programs" (p. 42). Furthermore, Lingard states:

The "boys as the new disadvantaged" rhetoric by contrast feeds into many of teachers' taken for granted assumptions; that is, boys require more time in class, require more discipline, are behaviour problems, are poor at expressing their emotions, etc. There is a way, then, in which the current backlash politics demands a return to the *status quo ante*; many teachers would be happy with that situation. (p. 43)

Various Australian and American media reports function as "surfaces of emergence" upon which the boy problem is inscribed within the context of moral panic and anti-feminist backlash (see Foster et al, 2001). Moreover, appeals to essentialist notions of boyhood and boys' "natural" behaviour also emerge as boys are constituted as particular kinds of "normal" subjects. For example, Arndt (2001), a journalist for *The Sydney Morning Herald*, claims that "schools are far from boy friendly." She quotes extensively from a book written by a boys' school "Headmaster" Dr. Tim Hawkes to assert "the importance of ... action-based learning rather than docile, literary-based tasks." Arndt quotes Hawkes to support the assertion that

"Most boys like to be physically involved, they like to do, they like to touch," says Hawkes, who also mentions the research which shows boys are more likely to respond to short "closed" tasks rather than long open-ended tasks.

This appeal to selective research to establish, through gendered binary classificatory systems, the "truth" of boys' and girls' essential difference is significant and endemic in many media accounts of male teachers and boys' education. There is a strong tendency to normalize boys and to construct their behaviour in schools as an expression of innate or "natural" masculinity. This leads Arndt and many others to construct the problem as a need for schools to *defeminize* and *remasculinize* curricula and pedagogies (Mitchell, 2004; Hoff-Sommers, 2000; Hart, 2000). In short, the feminizing, emasculating influences of schooling emerge as the source of trouble for boys and account for their failure in educational contexts (see McArthur, 2004; Mitchell, 2004; Higgins, 2002). For instance, Hawkes is quoted by Arndt (2001) as posing the following question: "When at least 80 percent of primary teachers are female, is it surprising that boys equate school and learning with femininity?"

A similar construction of boys and elementary schools as feminized learning environments also emerges in the *National Post* in Canada, in an article entitled "Let boys be boys" (see Editorial, 2003):

Educators are beginning to quantify an "enthusiasm gap" between girls and boys in co-ed public schools. The reason: schools, especially elementary schools, have become feminized. Elementary school teachers and administrators who once understood that boys will be boys, now act, at least, as though they expect boys to be more like girls.

In the article, Dr. Leonard Sax, an American psychologist, is quoted as claiming that "most boys' brains are hardwired" to respond to confrontation and that "aggressiveness just naturally draws the best out of boys." This leads Sax to argue that "deprogramming maleness in boys at an early age and in lower grades has failed." In a sidebar internet discussion in response to this editorial entitled "Schools and the Pussification of American Boys!" One person writes: "I'm really tired of wimpy, cute-fruit, girly looking men... I can't tell them from gay men... and would be afraid to date them." Another mentions the adoption of a new appearance and behaviour as "an attempt to metro-sexualize men in society," thus raising the issue of the perception of queer masculinities and the metrosexual as evidence of feminizing influences on men (see du Toit, 2003). For both respondents, this necessitates a resurgent call for remasculinization of men in the face of the perceived threat of emergent forms of alternative and queer masculinities.

These media texts foreground the circulation of particular backlash discourses in response to "new" forms of male subjectivities or self-fashioning practices that interrupt dominant notions of traditional masculinity (Lingard & Douglas, 1999; Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2003). Such interruptions, however, appear to have incited a countervailing discourse which resorts to biological determinism in response to anxiety about the perceived social problem of boys' and men's "pussification." Titus (2004), in fact, claims that

“moral panic” involves “a process of inciting public anxiety about a social problem by means of media hyperbole” and that “the concern is about a perceived threat to values or interests held sacred by society or a threat to the social order itself” (p. 145). He adds that through such moral panic, certain ideological beliefs get “assembled as factual accounts” and become “authorized as scientific knowledge while others are treated with suspicion and disqualified as false propaganda” (p. 146).

Media accounts are useful in foregrounding the dominant culture’s tendency to constitute boys as particular kinds of subjects whose “natural” masculinity is thwarted by a feminized educational system. Thus moral panic functions as a platform for staging broader debates regarding threatened traditional masculinities in the face of wider cultural and pro-feminist influences. These influences produce the “pussification of men” (du Toit, 2003) and, hence, alternative forms of masculinity which require defeminization (see Kendall & Martino, 2006). This crisis also provides fertile ground for the insertion of male role models, or “real men” in schools – “normal” men – as the panacea for restoring boys’ failing masculinities in schools.

More male role models for boys

This moral panic is further fuelled by statistics cited in media reports stressing the continuing decline of men choosing to enter the teaching profession. The effect of this decline is the incitement of an already intensified “masculinity crisis” which includes not only “failing boys,” but the lack of male role models as the root of boys’ problems in schools (see Mills, Martino & Lingard, 2004). Within this backlash and public anxiety, male teachers are presented as victims of female dominated workplaces; education is therefore constituted as “that soft, nurturing profession, not the place for guys” (Mitchell, 2004). In an article published in the *Canadian Globe and Mail* entitled “Goodbye Mr. Chips”, the male teacher as victim is immediately invoked through emotional language describing male teachers as “a dying breed in Canada’s classrooms” and claiming that “by all indications the battle to save him is a lost cause” (Mitchell, 2004). This decline is highlighted by statistics stating that 44 per cent of all full-time teachers in elementary schools are men, although “four in every 10 still in the field are over 50.” The article also describes a decline in young male teachers entering the profession, with males comprising “just 22 percent of full-time teachers in their 20s ... If this trend continues, the profession will have four or five times as many women as men” (Mitchell, 2004).

However, rather than pursuing a more nuanced analysis of the femiphobia, misogyny, and homophobia surrounding the policing of masculinities for male teachers (Martino & Berrill, 1996; Berrill & Martino, 2006; Mills, 2004), the journalist resorts to simplistic, “common sense” male role model theories to account for boys’ problems in school. For example, boys’ lower literacy

performance relative to girls is attributed to boys being "taught reading and writing exclusively by women" which, it is suggested, may lead the boys to suspect "that reading and writing simply aren't for men." Referring to Australian research, the journalist adds that "it may be more difficult for boys to learn from women than from men." This leads to the assertion that many teachers "are convinced that boys learn differently, in a more masculine way, and that male teachers are more capable of plugging into that" (Mitchell, 2004). These "truths" are expressed through practical teaching strategies that, for example, in a growing number of school districts across Ontario, Canada, reflect the bio-determinist claim that "it's because of the way they're wired ... boys and girls are wired differently" (see Fine, 2001).

Such "common sense" claims begin to take on the status of truth within the article, which also provides details of a case where a female principal works hard to counteract the feminization of the classroom through recruiting more male teachers and implementing single sex classes in year 7 (with the girls being taught by a woman, and the boys by a man). Recruiting more teachers at the school, however, entailed the creation of an informal male social club revolving around sport and creating "an atmosphere of fun and laughter." Male only spaces for male bonding appears to be one of the defeminizing strategies to counteract the perceived negative influence of the feminization of elementary schooling on male teachers' masculinities (see Skelton, 2001; Roulston & Mills, 2000; Mills, 2000). Absent from such accounts is a gender analysis regarding how male bonding functions to enforce and legitimate certain hegemonic practices of masculinity that are often policed through femiphobia and homophobia (Skelton, 2001). As Mills (2004) argues regarding recruitment of male teachers:

there is no mention made of the ways in which homophobia, and its counterpart misogyny, have worked to keep some men out of teaching, especially in certain areas of the curriculum and schooling system. Nor is there any recognition of the differences amongst men. (p. 29)

While Mitchell (2004) draws attention to the gender politics regarding men's rejection of teaching on the basis that it is "a profoundly counter-cultural thing for a man to do," the author resorts to invoking role theory to advocate common sense understandings about the need for male teachers to counteract the feminizing influences of elementary schooling.

In most media accounts, research and/or statistics are employed within a context of anti-feminism and moral panic to constitute knowledge/power relations that in turn constitute boys and male teachers as essentially different from girls/women in their behavioural and learning orientations. Hard-wired, bio-determinist arguments re-emerge in a media constructed "crisis of masculinity" that attempts to not only define the problem but also offer solutions in the same column. Another element of this discourse, consistent with those emerging in other media reports about the boys, is the powerful

way in which common sense is invoked regarding boys' and girls' essential difference (see Apple, 2001).

Moreover, more significant is the homogenizing tendency to normalize all boys and male teachers. Diversity amongst boys and men in relation to class, sexuality, race, ethnicity, geographical location, disability and how these influences might impact differently on individual boys and men are erased from such accounts of the boy problem in schools and the need for more male role models (see Collins et al, 2000; Mills, 2004; Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2003; Lingard, Martino, Mills & Bahr, 2002). These media accounts of boys and male teachers draw attention to the media's insertion of male subjects into a certain "game of truth" a normalizing regime in which their gender differences are relative to those of the opposite sex and legitimated through a moral panic informed by a recuperative masculinity politics (Lingard & Douglas, 1999). The media functions as an apparatus for the proliferation of certain truths about boys and male teachers within a complex field of social institutional practices and disciplinary regimens involving specific knowledge/power relations.

In an article in *The Western Australian*, "Schools fail boys" (Ruse, 2002), which comments on the findings of the recent Parliamentary Inquiry into Boys' Education in Australia¹, these discourses are invoked through links between boys' failure at school and the need for more male role models. The author reads the parliamentary report as necessarily involving "More male teachers, recognition of the fact that boys learn differently and programs aimed specifically at boys." He quotes the chairperson of the House of Representatives committee on education: "Boys tended to learn visually, required stronger discipline and needed male role models in schools" (Ruse, 2002, p. 3). The implication is that female teachers are unable to manage boys' behaviour and that boys need men to confirm their masculinity.

Such claims are grounded in problematic role theories regarding masculine scripts and are driven by a degree of misogyny in terms of how female teachers and their work in school are constituted (Skelton, 2002; 2003). This is also reflected in a recent spate of Australian media reports within the context of the opposition leader's speech about boys' suffering from a "crisis of masculinity." In one report by Carr-Gregg (2004), published in *The Australian* newspaper, boys' social problems are directly linked to a "fatherless Australia" and the absence of "good male role models." It argues that "father absence" plays a crucial role in the increasing prevalence of social and psychological morbidity among our young people, especially boys. The suggested answer is to give Australian men:

the skills, knowledge and strategies to mentor effectively and to be a charismatic adult for our boys, a person who will make them feel safe, valued and listened to... So where do we start? We could adequately resource orga-

nizations such as Australian Football League, the National Rugby League, Cricket Australia and Netball Australia to run programs in urban, rural and remote regions of Australia. Young men and women could be exposed to great adult role models, and have the chance to use the skills that nature gave them in a way that is meaningful to them. (Carr-Gregg, 2004)

This leads the author to claim that: "Since another key protective factor in young people's lives are schools, there is an urgent need to get more men into primary schools then boys would not equate learning with something feminine" (Carr-Gregg, 2004). The claim is then made that, "thanks to Nelson" (the former Federal Minister for Education in Australia), "boy-friendly schools acknowledge that boys learn differently from girls and seek to accommodate these differences." The need for "boy-friendly schools" is grounded in a politics of gender differences in turn based on biological essentialism (see Harding, 1998; Petersen, 1998).

In another article in *The Australian*, Maiden (2004) claims that all we need to do is "to ask boys why they want more male teachers and any concerns that the nation's schools are polluted by political correctness fly out the window." Thus the argument regarding the need for more male role models is simplistically reduced to a form of political correctness. In a roundtable discussion at one elementary school, eleven-year-old boys are quoted as saying: "Yes, I had a female principal once and it was hell. You do something small and they act like it is the end of the world," and "I sometimes find it easier to communicate with boy teachers." The following girl's comment is also included: "Boys work better with a male teacher because they listen."

Other research detailing boys' declaration of their dissatisfaction with male "macho dickhead teachers" who they claim are "power freaks" could equally have been selected (see Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2005). Moreover, in a research report entitled *Addressing the Educational Needs of Boys* (funded by the Australian government), students indicated that the gender of the teacher did not make a difference in terms of their learning (see also Ashley & Lee, 2003). Rather, students highlighted certain teacher traits and skills, such as the ability to teach well and to engage students through providing a relevant curriculum; set firm boundaries in terms of managing classroom behaviour; establish a friendly and warm approach in the classroom; relate to students as people and to explain concepts (see Lingard, Martino, Mills & Bahr, 2002).

The logic of recuperative masculinity politics and moral panic surrounding boys' educational issues preclude a nuanced discussion of the complex cultural factors and forms of homophobia that act as gate-keeping mechanisms for policing masculinities. These may function as barriers for those men who do not consider teaching to be a viable or suitable option. Rather than considering the perception of teaching as an economically unattractive profession,

compounded by its devaluation as woman's work (Williams, 1993; Bradley, 1993; King, 2000; Mills, Martino & Lingard, 2004), the male role model debate is often articulated at the expense of these very issues. In fact, the logic of recuperative masculinity politics actively marks out the limits of the boys' education debates, casting both boys and male teachers as victims of the feminization of schooling.

This tendency surfaces in relation to the Australian debate regarding changes to the Sex Discrimination Act to enable men's scholarships as a strategy for attracting more male teachers. Increasing teacher salaries to improve the status of the profession is eschewed in favour of affirmative action which would exempt men from paying university fees. However, in an article written by the Federal Sex Discrimination Commissioner (Goward, 2004), entitled "Better pay would lure more men into schools," Goward explicitly states that the issue surrounding the male teacher debate is linked to the status of the profession and has more to do with economics:

[Y]oung men are not attracted to teaching because they can earn better money elsewhere. As women's work it has never been remunerated properly. Front-loading the pay of male teacher students through a scholarship, effectively relieving them of the HECS burden their female counterparts will carry into their professional careers, entrenches this inequity and has not been demonstrated to address the disparity in numbers of male and female teachers in the long term.² ... Australia's efforts to overcome historical and continuing inequalities against women have never been based on enforceable quotas. Australia after all has recognized that assisting women to achieve positions based on anything apart from merit may well hinder rather than help in achieving equality. It's about giving everyone a fair go. Removing the requirement for merit in the award of teaching scholarships for young men is a big change from that. The government, and surely the community, needs to be sure that the proposed amendment can achieve its purpose before even considering support for any deviation from the merit principle. However, if that is the way forward, then the government should immediately introduce programs that pay a premium to women who enter parliament or seek positions as executive board members, university professors, surgeons, engineers, senior military officers or judges – areas in which women are still disadvantaged and seriously under-represented. (2004, p. 15)

This alternative discourse within the male role model debate draws attention to the powerful logic of recuperative masculinity politics. These politics are governed by the idea that men are disadvantaged through structural and institutional relations of inequality, thus paralleling the oppressive power relations impacting women's participation in the labour market. Informing such a position is "a rhetoric of entitlement" (Titus, 2004, p. 150) infused implicitly with blame directed at the feminizing and feminized culture of schooling.

Analysis of selected media coverage of the boys' education debate highlights the assumption that more male role models will necessarily improve the quality of schooling for boys. Differences between male and female teachers are underscored by certain understandings regarding masculinity and femininity that translate into distinctly gendered modes of teaching. There is a strong belief that such gender differences necessitate a pedagogy that provides boys with clear, simple directions and structured tasks (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Training, 2002; Mitchell, 2004). West (2004), for example, argues that such a pedagogical approach is needed because boys are less confident with words and tend to prefer work presented in bite-sized pieces.

Such approaches do not appear to be consistent with a productive pedagogical model for producing better educational and social outcomes (see Lingard et al, 2003; Darling-Hammond, 1997; Aness, 2003).³ How could such a pedagogy enable boys to develop the skills required to actively participate in a society and labour market that demand high order processing and high levels of interpersonal and emotional literacy (see Martino & Berrill, 2003; Nayak, 2003; Martino, Mills & Lingard, 2004)? Despite the claim that male teachers are more tolerant of "hands-on" learning, there is no available evidence that this actually produces better educational outcomes for boys. In fact, one case study found that several such "boy friendly" pedagogies involved "dumbing down" the curriculum for boys rather than focusing on quality teaching and learning (see Lingard, Martino, Mills & Bahr, 2002; Martino & Meyenn, 2002).

Implications and conclusion

This paper has focused on mapping the limits of the boys' education and male teacher debate through the public media. A close analysis of Australian and North American media sources has highlighted the extent to which a particular logic, governed by a recuperative masculinity politics (Lingard & Douglas, 1999), informs and frames the constitution of boys and male teachers as victims of the feminization of schooling. It has been proposed that this constitution of the male subject within the context of the boys' education debate needs to be understood within a broader socio-political and cultural context of backlash (Faludi, 1991) and "moral panic" (Titus, 2004), both of which are driven by a New Right commitment to the remasculinization of schooling and the re-traditionalizing of hegemonic masculinities (Apple, 2001; Martino & Berrill, 2003). It has been argued that media construction of boys and male teachers as the "new disadvantaged" is in fact a defensive response to broader social and cultural currents regarding non-normative families and male subjectivities that threaten traditional and hegemonic masculinities.

Addressing teacher recruitment and boys' social and learning needs requires framing the male role model issue in non-simplistic and non-reductionist notions of gender. Within the context of the call to defeminize schools, the male teacher debate and the construction of boys as gendered subjects highlights the need to address complex issues of sexuality, gender normalization, and the policing of masculinities, and to develop broader notions of what it means to be male in schools (see King, 1998, 2000; Skelton, 2003; Kehler, 2004; Kissen, 2002; Pinar, 1998; Britzman, 1995; Tierney & Dille, 1998). Moreover, the media's role in the proliferation of certain discourses about boys and the role of male teachers in schooling needs to be addressed. This discussion must acknowledge the production of knowledge, power relations, and truth claims articulated in the public domain, specifically in terms of their capacity to influence educational policy and practice in schools (Lingard, 2003; Mills, 2004; Mills, Martino & Lingard, 2004). Due to the apparent "fact" or "truth claim" that boys are essentially different from girls, boys have been and continue to be constructed through the public media and "boy problem" discourses as *at risk* in the feminized and feminizing context of the school environment (see Skelton, 2002; 2003; Lingard & Douglas, 1999; Lingard, Martino, Mills & Bahr, 2002). This is not to deny that certain groups of boys are experiencing problems that need to be addressed if their educational and social outcomes are to be improved. However, within these debates, there is a tendency to homogenize boys and to avoid discussion about *which* boys (and which girls) are most at risk.

On this basis, we argue for a teacher threshold knowledge (Darling-Hammond, 1997; Lingard et al, 2003) to be built around interrogating gender regimes in students' and teachers' lives. To be avoided is the tendency to resort to simplistic stereotypes about boys' active, hands-on learning versus girls' passive participation and sex-role socialization as an explanatory framework for addressing their educational needs (see Connell, 1995; Skelton, 2002). Also required is a focus on how male teachers learn to police their masculinities, the implications of students' construction as gendered subjects, and what these mean in approaches to teaching boys (Bailey, 1996; Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2003). These foci are consistent with hooks' (1994) conceptualization of the classroom as a "location of possibility" where strategic pedagogical intervention conducive to "collectively imagin[ing] ways to move beyond boundaries, to transgress" is advocated (p. 207; see Giroux, 1997).

The productive pedagogies model, with its focus on teacher threshold knowledge, is a useful framework for critically thinking about how our understandings about gender may either enable or limit our capacity to build a gender-inclusive community. This focus is important, given the broader range of post and de-industrial skills and capacities required in a changing labour market – previously considered "soft" skills such as emotional literacy and

interpersonal skills. Such a pedagogical model also draws attention to the limits of male recruitment as a panacea for addressing the "boy problem" in schools. Students continually reiterate that it is not so much the gender of the teacher but rather the quality of the pedagogy and the teacher-student relationship that matters most in their learning. Ashley and Lee (2003), for example, assert that "it is naive to promote the notion that ethnic minority teachers are needed because they can be caring role models for pupils of similar ethnicity" (p. 108). They add that

teachers are respected by primary school boys of any ethnicity when they have the ability to teach. It is quite clear that boys will judge by this criterion and any teacher must prove him/herself to the boys through teaching ability, not through motherliness, similar ethnicity, or the presence of being a heroic role model. (p. 109)

This does not mean that an effort should not be made to recruit and retain male teachers, especially minority male teachers. What should be avoided, however, are essentialist arguments about the need for male role models in schools as a panacea for addressing boys' diverse educational and social problems. As Ashley and Lee (2003) argue:

There appears to be little evidence that supports the idea that boys growing up in single parent mother households need to have a compensatory male role model in school. Indeed, rather sadly, our evidence often suggests the contrary. A poor male role model at home or school can do a great deal of damage, whereas no male role model at all does not necessarily lead to any kind of problem. (p. 63)

We wish to reiterate the need to avoid assumptions regarding men as victims of inequitable power relations that prevent them from gaining entry into the teaching profession. Rather, an interrogation of the intersecting factors of class, race, ethnicity and sexuality is needed, specifically in terms of their impact on groups of boys and men that differ significantly from dominant white males. Addressing the status of teaching as a profession also requires interrogation of the very system or culture of masculinity that leads to a denigration and devaluation of "women's work" (see Willams, 1993). Also needed is interrogation of hegemonic models of masculinity built on homophobic denigration and surveillance of the feminine and that feed into construction of non-hegemonic male teachers as suspect. It is a system of masculinity that gets actively adopted and encouraged in many men's and boys' lives; to be associated with the feminine or with traditional "women's work" is to have one's masculinity and sexuality brought into question (see Frank, 1987; 1993; Frank et al, 2003; Kehler, 2006; Martino & Palotta-Chiarolli, 2003; Mills, 2001; Tomsen & Donaldson, 2003; Kimmel, 1999; Kuypers, 1999; Stoltenberg, 1999).

At the heart of male elementary teachers' fears is the charge of child abuse or pedophilia. Transgressing normative masculinity may produce homophobic

surveillance based on equations of non-normative masculinities and homosexuality, and ultimately to conflation of homosexuality with pedophilia and deviancy (Tierney & Dilley, 1998; Sears, 1998). In this sense, any public discussion regarding male teacher recruitment needs to address the limits of hegemonic heterosexual masculinity (see Berrill & Martino, 2002; Mills, 2004). Also required is active questioning of the ways in which masculinity is constructed through denigration of or disassociation from the feminine, coupled with an interrogation of the conflation of homosexuality with pedophilia. There is silence surrounding these issues within debates about boys' education and strategies for recruitment of male teachers. Breaking such silence would pry open the ways in which the gender system works in the everyday world and its significant impacts on male teachers' fashioning of masculinity, their pedagogical practices and relationships with students in school, and their surveillance within the broader community (see Epstein & Johnson, 1998).

Through analysis of the boys' education debate in the public media, we have highlighted a commitment to maintaining a gender system founded on essentialist notions of masculinity and femininity. There is little explicit interrogation of the policing of masculinities through homophobia and the denigration of the feminine (see Martino, 2000; Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2003; Davison, 2000). A more sophisticated media debate regarding male role models is clearly needed. This is not to argue that male teachers should be discouraged from embracing elementary school teaching, or that they may not be a positive influence in helping boys to develop a "healthy masculinity"; rather, we argue that assumptions regarding "healthy masculinity" cannot be made on the basis of biological essentialism or sex differences. In fact, Mills (2000) argues for men's involvement in work with boys on gender issues as a part of their responsibility to "challenge the existing gender order" (p.221). This raises the following questions:

- What sort of men are needed in schools?
- What versions of masculinity do male teachers need to promote or support?
- What role might men play in helping boys develop nurturing, caring, non-violent, and respectful relationships with others?
- Will simply increasing the number of male teachers in schools necessarily lead to improving boys' educational and social outcomes?

These are important questions that need to be addressed at the policy level and within the public domain. They raise issues pertaining to gender normalization and stereotyping, and their capacity to inhibit quality teaching and learning for boys and girls in schools. In this sense, we believe that the solution is not necessarily importing more male teachers into the elementary classroom. Rather, as we have argued in this paper, consideration of the kinds

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of masculinity to be promoted in schools is needed, including the ways in which this process might lead to better educational and social outcomes for both boys and girls.

NOTES

1. It could be argued that the Australian media has played a significant role in inciting moral panic around the boys' education issue through media support for findings of a Federal Parliamentary inquiry into boys' education. This involved collecting and collating 231 written submissions from the public and conducting interviews with “experts” and those with knowledge of boys' education. The committee was comprised of members of parliament from the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Training who produced a report on the inquiry into the education of boys entitled *Boys: Getting it Right* (2002).
2. HECS (Higher Education Contribution Scheme) is the fee paying requirement for students studying at Australian universities.
3. Productive pedagogies relate to those dimensions of classroom practice that produce improved and more equitable student outcomes. These include: (i) a high degree of intellectual quality; (ii) high levels of “connectedness” in terms of curriculum content and its application to the students' lives outside of school; (iii) supportive classroom environments where students feel valued and are encouraged to take risks in their learning; (iv) a strong recognition and celebration of difference.

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