

Book Reviews

JAMES R. KING. *Uncommon Caring: Learning from men who teach young children*. New York: Teachers College Press (1998). 168 pp. \$19.95 ISBN: 0-8077-3739-9 (paper): \$44 ISBN: 0-8077-3740-2 (cloth).

As I watched the argument grow and intensify, I realized that I had lost control of the direction of this third year B. Ed. professional seminar class. These twenty-one elementary education teacher candidates were engaged in their own war of words and ideas, and operating on a plane and with the intensity associated with those in the heat of battle that momentarily excluded me – the slightly over the hill faculty instructor.

“What the hell do you mean ‘Men have fewer discipline problems?’” asked Mary with a rising tone and a straight back delivery. Her question appeared to be thrown across the tables at the targeted male colleague. Not to be outdone, Robert replied in an equally forceful manner, “It is a proven fact that men have fewer management problems than women because of our stronger voices!” Sally responded with a note of skepticism, “What ‘proven facts’ are you referring to – sounds like an old fashioned male chauvinistic pig attitude to me!”

The accusations, comments, questions, and half-truths flew around the room. Detached from the *melée*, I was pleasantly surprised to notice that even in the heat of this gender battle, civility showed itself as the students let others finish before they commented. Quite clearly, this was an unequal contest as the three male students attempted to ward off the arrows of an overwhelmingly more numerous group of females. However, within a few moments it became clear that the wrath had been spent and the various arguments and statements were coming around for the second and third trips as the knowledge base of these teachers-in-training demonstrated its limiting depth.

Over a quarter century of my own evolving preservice education training experiences, I have encountered a consistently small number of men who had opted for the elementary option. I really did not give their career decisions much thought, or – strangely – did I dwell on my original motives either. At times, I would vaguely remember my interview for my first full-time public school teaching position. In my mind, the overall interview had progressed well, and the committee (made up of two principals and one board official) were chatting with me in regard to grade level, school location, long-term plans, etc. My clear desire for an elementary position was seriously challenged even though I had just completed an elementary training program. While I cannot

recollect the conversation in its entirety or with absolute accuracy, the following assertions are representative.

- Why do you want to *waste* yourself at the elementary level?
- You know, some people may think that you are f-u-n-n-y?
- What good is your masters degree in history at grade four?
- Well, even if you want the elementary grades, the *Board* has a policy of never placing a man in the lower grades!
- We never leave males – *normal* males that is – longer than two or three years in grade schools as teachers – our parents will *talk*!

Resurfacing back to the present and reasserting my place at the end of the room and at the head of the table, I called the class together and attempted to review and make some professional sense of the last several minutes. My innocent questions of what appeared to be so long ago had simply asked, “I wonder why so few males select elementary education as a career?” and “what might be in your opinion some of the differences between male and female elementary teachers?”

As the professional seminar group refocused and redirected its individual and collective thoughts, Mary commented that her brother-in-law and sister had refused to send their preschool aged children to a particular day-care center near their home because the facility employed male caregivers. This somewhat drastic decision was based on their apparently collective and strong conception that men were “dangerous” with your children. Roberta, in a similar vein, reported to the group that her cousin had stated at a recent family gathering that any man who taught in the primary grades was “not to be trusted”. Still another female student acknowledged that her sister had told her that men should only be allowed to work with young children if a female co-caregiver was always in attendance. As the chat and the individual narratives emerged and the stories became far more intimate and personal, the full import of the overt gender discrimination added a new and somewhat awkward tone to the discussion. One student quietly asked, “Why is it OK for a father to take care of his own child, but no one else’s?”

In this vein, James R. King has written a powerful and thought provoking book. At times, this is a disturbing volume. King combines a set of unique and intimate narratives within a ‘caring’ philosophical framework. King attempts to come to grips with the social and community

pressures as well as the all too often unspoken sexual and gender undertones that permeate this whole issue of men as primary caregivers. In part, *Uncommon Caring* documents the personal and professional stories of six current male primary teachers and presents a different and intimate snap-shot of an aspect of their professional lives. Additionally, *Uncommon Caring* presents an overview of a North American society that appears to demand that fathers take a more proactive stance in child rearing and yet, conversely, finds unsubstantiated fault with men who wish to work with young children. Furthermore in an ever more twisted and at times Kafkaesque-like scenario, this same community creates and sustains stereotypical issues. These submerged images, along with selected isolated public examples, tend to brand all male caregivers as somewhat deviant (or at least potentially deviant) 'non-men' who cannot be trusted with the care of young children.

There is no question that male elementary teachers are a minority within the realm of the North American elementary school. The National Education Association [NEA] (1997) reports that males account for only 9.1% of the total elementary teaching cohort. The comparative data from the NEA over the last several decades clearly demonstrates that there has been a marked dissolution in absolute numbers of male elementary teachers over the last fifteen years. Specifically, the NEA stated that "percentages of males at the elementary levels have declined steadily since 1981, dropping from 17.7 percent to 9.1 percent in 1996" (p. 76).

Equally recent but less detailed information from the Canadian Teachers' Federation (1998) reports that during the 1994–1995 school year, 22.7% of all elementary (more broadly defined as grades K to 8) teachers in Canada were male. It is important to note the significant decline within the three years since the cross-Canada survey by King and Peart (1992) which indicated a male elementary percentage of 6% in the K to 3 grade range, and 28% at the grades 4 to 6 levels. However, the prediction by King and Peart that male percentages at the elementary level would begin to drastically decline by the turn of the century and begin to mirror the single digit figures as represented by the American data appears to be demonstrated by these figures. Finally, very recent data from the Gouvernement du Québec (1998) indicate that no more than 2% of preschool teachers are males and only about 15% of elementary level teachers are males.

Uncommon Caring raises a number of very important and all too often ignored professional issues. King suggests that men who enter the

primary arena do so against a backdrop of unstated criticism and innuendo. Specifically, King suggests that “a public perception is that men who teach primary grades are often either homosexuals, pedophiles, or principals in training” (p. 3). Throughout his look at the caring environment of the primary school, King constantly juxtapositions notions and paints a realistic and interwoven picture that is both disturbing and enthralling. At times bordering on the rhetorical, King challenges his readers to break commonly held myths as well as ill-conceived perceptions, and to engage in a fundamental discussion of males as primary care givers and of young children as primary care receivers.

Teachers can either be committed or uncommitted to their caring for children. Their construction of teaching as caring is based on their own philosophies about learning and about children. Biological sex as well as sexual orientation have evidently little to do with whether or not men are or can be effective as primary teachers. Socially constructed gender roles and their effective deployment *are* teaching. It is, therefore, others' use of their own perceptions of caring and their automatic suspicions about men's acts of caring that are the real problem with men in elementary teaching. (emphasis in original, p. 139).

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