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Dr Joanne McDowell



Doing 'being' a primary school teacher: Does gender matter?

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Think back to your early childhood days in primary school. Now I know for some of you this may be farther back than you may want to think about, but please bear with me. When you think of those care-free days, were you taught predominantly (or even totally) by females? Now, fast forward to today and think of who primarily teaches young children today. Has anything changed? Or do women still make up the majority of Britain's primary school teaching workforce? In short, yes, they do. In the year 2015/2016 less than 13% of primary school teachers in the UK were male (DoE, 2016). There are various explanations that try to illuminate why this could be, the most frequent given that primary teaching is seen as a job only suitable for women. Characteristics such as 'caring' are seen as central to the role, and Western society mainly still envisions that it is only women, and not men, that possess such characteristics (MacDougall, 1997). The almost total absence of male teachers in many UK primary schools has led to the suggestion that the girls' repeated better academic performance (in contrast to the underachievement of boys) may be a result of the feminisation of the teaching profession which has provided boys with too few male role models (Dee, 2007). One main area of discussion surrounds that of classroom management, namely discipline, with thoughts that more men are needed in order to enforce 'tougher' discipline, as women are stereotyped to have a more 'liberal' style (Martin and Yin 1997). Others however, disagree with this claim (Skelton *et al*, 2009), and indeed have found empirical evidence to the contrary, that women also use 'tough' discipline (Read, 2008). Such issues have led to an on-going debate about whether there is actually any need for more male primary school teachers at all (Carrington *et al*, 2007; Harrop and Swinson, 2011), whether they can actually bring anything different to teaching that women cannot offer and question what more male teachers would actually do for the children in terms of their academic achievement (Beaman, Wheldall, and Kemp, 2006; Carrington *et al.*, 2008). One way to address the aforementioned questions is to explore how male and female primary school teachers actually interact with their students in the classroom.

I have recently conducted research in 5 Hertfordshire Primary schools, collecting data from both male and female teachers across several days of teaching to look at such interactions. One interesting finding is that both male and female teachers use what are stereotyped to be 'masculine' strategies (e.g. aggression; unmitigated orders and direct criticism) to carry out discipline (Read, 2008; see Mills and Mullany, 2011, p.53). However, both men and women (more so the men) also use 'feminine' or more 'liberal' styles (e.g. mitigated directives and criticism; use of positive sanctions; hinting via hedged statements) to discipline their students, often with great success. So both males and females often use stereotypical 'gendered' language style of 'the other'. So what does this tell us? I think it strongly points to the need to move away from the stereotype that women linguistically behave in one way and men another, especially as language is something we use to *perform* our identity within any given context (masculine, feminine, professional etc.). Performing one's identity means that we are not passive puppets in our identity construction (Butler, 2004); rather we *actively* and *routinely* perform them through language. Therefore we can perform various identities depending on our context (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 1999), so within the workplace, professionals perform their job role via the linguistic repertoire of said occupation. In the case of teaching, what these teachers are doing is making use of speech styles that are the most *effective* in their milieu. They are '*doing*' being a good teacher, and gender should not be seen as a prerequisite for this effectiveness. Teachers must adapt their styles accordingly to both the situation in the classroom and also to each individual child and what will work best with them. This is what makes an effective teacher, and this is far more important than emphasising teacher gender. Recruiting efforts should stress the competencies that all teachers share (i.e. instructional skills) and not employ stereotypical role-model arguments as they so often currently do (e.g. men are needed to provide tougher discipline).

So, do we need more men in primary school teaching? Undoubtedly, yes. But this is not because of the existing assumption that they can offer something women teachers cannot, which can be seen as gender bias. Instead, qualified male teachers are needed in order to tackle the deficit as Britain, like so many other countries, is experiencing a shortage of primary school teachers. Furthermore, pupils need to be taught by a wide range of teachers that are representative of the pupil cohort which includes not just men and women, but also teachers from a range of ethnic and gendered backgrounds. However, this may not be an easy task. Primary school teaching still remains seen as 'women's work' and this can often act to deter men from taking up the role. Women have long been rightly told that they can be what they want to be - that they can enter into traditional 'men's work, to not let their gender prevent them from doing so. However, we have not seen the same push for men. Men who enter into so-called 'female' professions often report challenges to their masculinity - they are often labelled by society as gay, unmanly, or even as sexual predators (Cross and Bagihole, 2006; Simpson, 2004; Isaacs, and Poole, 1996; Williams, 1995). Such attitudes can only be tackled if the long-standing assumptions that men and women cannot, or should not, undertake certain roles because of their gender are challenged. Jobs, and all that they entail such as language and characteristics needed, must be de-gendered. Current research, including my own (McDowell, 2018; McDowell, 2015a, 2015b) may enable us to take a step towards this goal, and act as a future aide to encourage more men to become primary school teachers.

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