

**‘Please can we have a man?’: male trainee English teachers entering predominantly female departments.**

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For thirteen years I worked as a male secondary English teacher. I had noted that in English departments men were consistently in the minority, usually one or two in a department. Over the years my colleagues’ perception was that male English teachers were either exceptionally good or noticeably weak. Therefore, a male English teacher stood out. Moving from school to a University education department where I led a PGCE secondary English course I met many mentors of secondary English trainees, in school and at the University. Several mentors requested a *male* trainee teacher, saying, “Please can we have a man?” I was intrigued and spoke with a group of mentors who said:

“It would be good for the department.”

“It would make a change.”

“It would be good for the boys to have a role model.”

“It would be good to get some fresh ideas.”

“It would be exciting and a challenge.”

“We haven't had a man in the department for ages.”

These responses confirmed the need for the study. I carried out two small-scale pilot studies at two universities, followed by an ethnographic study at the University where I worked to gain new insights into the experiences of men learning to teach in predominantly female English departments. I use the term ‘predominantly female’ with its nuance of more abundant and frequent, to reflect the numerical dominance of female teachers in English departments.

On the PGCE secondary English course that formed the focus of the study there were 18 women and 7 men. This ratio is typical of the gender balance on PGCE secondary English

courses (Howson, 2000) and in school English departments. Statistically, a male trainee a male teacher carries a premium.

My position is neither theoretically nor emotionally linked with an anti-feminist backlash (Faludi, 1991). Neither do I take an anti-female-teacher stance that defends the interests of male teachers. I have carried out the roles that I discuss here - English teacher, mentor, head of department - in the predominantly female environment of a secondary girls' school. This history provides me with an awareness of the pro-feminist responsibilities I have as a man teaching and researching in the predominantly female contexts of a University education department and secondary English teaching. These are the autobiographical gender lenses through which I analyse the experiences of male English trainees and show what masculinities have to do with the training of male English teachers. I do this by focusing on some of the changes undergone by the men and examining their shifting awareness of their masculinities.

### **Teaching: a predominantly female profession**

Initial teacher training legislation (DfEE, 1998b; DfES/TTA, 2002) requires each trainee to be allocated a school-based mentor working in partnership with the University. In my study most of these mentors responsible for 'coaching, counselling and assessment' (Fletcher, 2000:1) were female as were the other English teachers. Therefore, the concept of the 'feminisation' of schooling (Miller, 1992, 1996) is central to the experiences of the men in my study. The feminisation of teaching as a career provides the social and historical context for the male trainees' experience of joining a predominantly female profession with a history of low status. If education has become an 'unmasculine business' (Miller, 1996: 135) for pupils I am interested in whether teaching is unmasculine for the male trainees who, as pupils, experienced the abundance of female teachers. My analysis is positioned within teacher socialisation theory (Lacey, 1977) and masculinities constructionist theory (Connell, 1995).

The statistical dominance of female teachers is a key, but not the only, feature of the feminisation of teaching. Teaching has been, and continues to be, perceived as 'women's

work' (Williams, 1993) especially in early years and primary sectors. Where they do exist, male teachers are studied because they are anomalous. The number of female head teachers and deputy head teachers has steadily increased during the period 1992-2001 (source, National College for School Leadership). As teaching has become professionalised and its 'functions' seen as 'masculinized' (Mac an Ghail, 1994) it is still mainly done by women, many of whom have taken on Mac an Ghail's 'hard masculine' roles in middle and senior management positions. Mac an Ghail argues that is because teaching has borrowed functions from business and commerce that its management is seen as becoming more masculinised. Paradoxically, whilst management and leadership structures have been masculinised, teaching is increasingly managed and led by women. The men in my study acknowledge their female colleagues' power (Duncan, 2002) and achievement and note how the maternal and the managerial are merged. In secondary schools there exist perceptions of 'masculine' and 'feminine' subjects (Thomas, 1990). The feminisation of English (Daly, 2000; Davison, 2000) exists in the views of pupils and teachers, in addition to the workforce statistics of men entering a predominantly female profession.

I have applied concepts of men entering occupations that are regarded as 'women's jobs' to a group of men entering the predominantly female workplace of the English department. By looking closely at the experiences of seven male trainees I was able to develop a detailed insight into their relations with entering teaching and the production of their masculinities in the schools. However, during the PGCE application process and the early days at the University the men did not articulate the significance of their gender in their teacher development and socialisation. The men did not see gender as an organising force in their lives although I immediately noticed manifestations of their minority status, reflected in their 'pack' like behaviours:

Week 1. Day 1. At the start of each seminar six out of the seven men sat around a cluster of tables in a men only group.

(Fieldnotes)

Only one of the men, Adam, interacted exclusively with female trainees and never joined the group of 'guys'. Throughout the year six of the seven men functioned as a group who

engaged in ‘male bonding’ (Tiger, 1969) in seminars and lectures and when socialising on campus and after school. Tinto’s (1993) idea of male trainees’ feeling of centrality can be used to explain how the men dominated disproportionately in University sessions. This fits with Penn (1998: 246) who observed that ‘men do not necessarily modify their masculinity on coming into a woman’s profession; they bring their masculinity and male assumptions with them’ and at this stage performed their hegemonic masculinities (Connell, 1995).

### **Men entering predominantly female English departments**

Things changed when the men went into school. Their initial belief that entry to a predominantly female workplace would be unproblematic is attributable to their privileged gender, race and class. The semi-structured interviews conducted at the start of teaching placements one and two and the end of the year provided a place for the men to talk about their socialisation as men in the workplace and captured their changing perceptions of their gender. They began to talk about being a male teacher, initially because they noticed what Sargent (2001) calls their ‘difference to the norm’ and realised the implications of being in a minority and atypical and the performance of multiple masculinities involved in being a male trainee English teacher. Their experience of training was in predominantly female departments as seen in the gender balance of total number of mentors and English teachers in school: 3 male to 11 female mentors; 19 male to 75 female teachers. The reaction of Ted’s female colleagues, excited about the novelty of a male trainee, was typical:

‘I think they were very keen about having a male teacher in. ... I think my mentor made a comment about that they were lacking in male teachers and it was nice to have a male teacher in.’

(Ted, Interview 3)

‘In’ the English department is characterised by the English office - a hybrid area for resources, work spaces, meetings and coffee. Henry told his female colleagues that coming into the English office was ‘like entering a coven’. He found himself thinking in sexist language when confronted with English department discourse dominated by female topics. Brian felt uncomfortable hearing conversations about ‘traditionally female topics like babies

or cellulite' which meant he took longer to settle down into 'the social side of being a teacher' and experiences social isolation (Sargent, 2001). Henry found that his female colleagues' willingness to talk about 'female' topics in front of him was an indicator of being accepted 'as an honorary girl or at least an honorary English teacher'. He thought his age and being a married father rendered him 'unthreatening in a sexual sort of way. I am not going to chat them up or be tiresome'. Henry reported not being mentored sufficiently and also attributed this to his age and his colleagues' thinking: "'You're a mature, responsible adult, we'll let you get on with things'". This increased his sense of isolation. Andy described his isolation as finding it hard to break in to the circle of female colleagues:

'I do chat but I just feel I am slightly outside, ever so slightly, not a lot, but it is such a tight unit and they work really well together. I just feel - it's the wrong word but I will use it as it is the only way I can describe it - cliquey ... that is what you might feel because it is so tight knit and a very separate department.'

(Andy, Interview 1)

Andy tried not to criticise his female colleagues but his inchoate description acknowledged the part his gender played in a female work environment.

During the final interviews the men were keen to reflect on their experiences of predominantly female English departments. Barry noted the paradox between the content of a feminised English curriculum (Davison, 2000) and the relative lack of power and status of those who teach it:

'It is fascinating that we have got the twenty-first century trying to meet the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries through English. It's fascinating. We have got all of these working class women mediating upper middle class men.'

(Barry, Interview 3)

Brian found it harder to settle because of a lack of contact with other men:

'... apart from two part time English teachers who don't show their faces round the English department very often, it's female dominated. It can't be seen as a criticism of any particular teacher, it's just that it has taken me longer to settle into the department.'

(Brian, Interview 3)

He felt that even in an English department with other male teachers the culture felt feminised:

'On my first placement there were two men. Even though the head of department was male, I found that the department was dominated by the

female teachers in terms of personality and the general way of the characters, the nature [of the department]

(Brian, Interview 3)

Andy had initially reacted positively to being in a gender balanced English department but even in this department the ethos was feminised. He described the English office was ‘a female dominated room’ with male colleagues ‘who you don’t see very often’. Towards the end of the course, Andy had learnt to like being in the minority and enjoyed his position of centrality but was aware of how he had changed his masculinity in order to cope:

‘The departments have been female based I suppose. I’ve enjoyed it. I quite like being in the minority in some ways. I think I have become more ‘manny’. (Laughs) I have been pushed over a bit. Just my behaviour and my general behaviour. My sense is I have become a bit more mannish, a bit more - not louty - but the type of sense of humour might have changed, a bit more male dominated ... Perhaps again because we are outnumbered ... I like being outnumbered, but you want to be heard.’

(Andy, Interview 3)

Andy was conscious of being more masculine or, in his words, ‘manny’, ‘mannish’ and ‘male dominated’. The strategy he was adopting is one of hyper-masculinity (Whitehead, 2002) and a reversion to hegemonic behaviours to counteract a feminised work culture. Finding a central role afforded the male trainees the male status that had been under threat. Andy confessed that he liked being an anomalous male drawing on Chaucer for illustration: ‘It is a bit like being Chauntecleer’. He was not consciously reproducing the hierarchical and oppressive masculinity of school as described by Mac an Ghail (1994) but his use of ‘male dominated’ humour created his heterosexual masculinity. In the data I identified the exclusively male networks of support created by the male trainees. These included text messaging, telephone calls and meeting for a drink, especially when they started to take over new classes.

### **Taking over classes from female English teachers**

The male trainees observed and took over classes from teachers who were mainly female. When training women created the first models of English teaching for the men. Andy

described the experience of taking a Year 7 class from a female teacher, remarking how his louder, deeper voice startled the pupils:

‘When I talk loudly, I shout: Right! They jump up and get a bit of a shock.’

Ted explained how pupils positioned him as a man and expected him to exert his authority by silencing them. When he failed at this he believed he failed as a man:

‘Last week they drove me over the hill, they just drove me mad – I thought that was it. I thought if my year 7s can’t be good then I’m done for as a man.’  
(Ted, Interview 1)

He did not conform to dominant ideologies of masculinity. He reported a further challenge to his hegemonic masculinity when his mentor told him to apply for a vacancy, in spite of his classroom control problems, telling him ‘she wanted a man in the department, even if he is not very good, at least he’s a man’ (Ted’s telephone call, Fieldnotes). When Barry found classroom management of a challenging class insurmountable because pupils associated his gender with hegemonic authority, he resorted to sexual language to explain how he felt to be failing in front of pupils and peers: ‘like a cock’, ‘like a dick’.

The men interpreted the mentors’ allocation of some challenging as signalling that they should be able, or at least should learn, to handle boys’ robust behaviour rather than adopt teaching styles appropriate to boys. As Henry explained: ‘one of the reasons that I got some of the lads was that it was thought that it would be a good challenge for me to have to deal with them’. Male strength and aggression were being tested and confirmed. This ties up with Weber and Mitchell’s analysis of gendered enactment of power:

‘the implication that men, because of their size, strength, and their very maleness, are not afraid, and have less difficulty controlling and maintaining order in a classroom than women do (an implication that those of us who have experienced the forceful power exerted by a female teacher know to be false).’  
(Weber and Mitchell, 1995: 135)

In my study the way the men were initially received by their mentors revealed the misconception that male trainees would be able to exert forceful power simply because they were men and would adopt a masculine style in the classroom.

### **Gendered teaching styles**

The seven men wanted to feel ‘comfortable’ in the classroom and be more relaxed than the teachers (mainly women) they saw. They could not replicate the more aggressive discipline strategies used by some female colleagues, in line with Sargent’s (2001). Ted told of female teachers shouting at disruptive pupils. In desperation, like the teachers he saw, Ted resorted to shouting but was aware of the need to modulate *his* shouting because of his physical size and potential voice production. The experience of shouting damaged his confidence and left him exasperated. Brian believed that female teachers had a predisposition for dealing with pupils:

‘I think it is the praising and the verbal punishing – maybe it is just my perception but it seems to me like it comes more naturally to the female teachers.’

(Brian, Interview 1)

He saw the practices of administering rewards and sanctions as being directed by gender, which distanced him from what he marginalised as ‘women’s work’. Brian’s initial preference for the lecture style is explained by his previous experience of higher education teaching and he associated didactic lecturing with masculine practices. In contrast, his identification of a maternal way of interacting with pupils is explained by the links between mothering and teaching (Walkerdine and Lucey, 1989):

‘The female teachers I am taking over from are very – they are very chatty, almost touchy-feely and quite motherly as well in the way that they talk to the pupils.’

(Brian, Interview 1)

Andy also believed female teachers were ‘more motherly’. Brian believed that in addition to English ‘being seen as a feminised subject ... teaching in general seems more natural for females’ and that women were more successful when handling groups of children. He thought women were ‘better’ teachers because the job lends itself to being maternal. This perception caused the male trainees problems as they were unable to replicate the female teachers’ motherly or ‘personalised’ (Arnot, 2002: 31) authority which was significantly different and separate from the powerful teaching strategies they saw being used by women.

The male trainees observed a maternal style that was not simply about caring and nurturing. Frequently women teachers were described using forceful ways with pupils that involved being stricter than the male trainees felt they could be:

‘I am not as strict as the female teachers I have taken over from, put it that way. They are very strict some of them.’

(Andy, Interview 1)

Female strictness involved a confusing mixture of shouting and physical proximity, ‘like their mum’, as Ted described:

‘I don’t know whether she should ... she goes right up to them close and kneels down next to their desk and just shouts at them, right up, really close, like their mum and really tells them how annoyed she is with them. She starts off slowly and builds up louder and louder – the kids do sit there looking rather terrified.’

(Ted, Interview 1)

Ted was disturbed by the ‘tough love’ approach, which he could not replicate because of his size and his gender. Like the other male trainees Ted and the other male trainees resisted deploying ‘real man’ masculinity as a teaching device and risked being perceived as bad or weak teachers. The men discovered that for men there are teaching styles associated with the power, authority and competence of masculinity and the incompetence, failure and weakness of femininity. The men were also in possession of additional gendered traits, including reading poetry and novels, associated with English.

I had expected the male trainees to use some male orientated teaching styles (Arnot, 2002) reliant on patriarchal authority and power. In contrast, as experienced feminist and post-modernist readers of literary texts, they turned out to be gentle men. They subscribed to ideas of the ‘new man’ (Haywood and Mac an Ghail, 2003) and were pro-feminist. They combined their knowledge to read female teachers using styles ranging from maternal:

‘When she talks to them it is like they are being talked to by their mother’

(Brian, Interview 1)

to disciplinarian:

‘I felt that some of the classes were a bit too subdued because the teachers were too keen to be in charge all the time.’

(Henry, Interview 1)

Often the advice offered was based on the impossible task of replicating women’s styles:

‘She said, “Make your presence known. Just be there. Hit them like a whirlwind. I’d love to be able to do that but I can’t try and ape her.’

(Matt, Interview 3)

Adopting the practices of masculine hegemony in a school was difficult:

‘I think it is extremely difficult to be a masculine teacher and to take what might be considered a masculine approach.’

(Brian, Interview 3)

Some approaches observed did not initially appear to be gendered. However, female teachers’ approaches became strange when performed by a man. Adam cited a female teacher rebuking a pupil:

‘with a sharp but non-aggressive “David - what have you forgotten?” ... or the use of a stern look whilst placing her fingers to her lips, in a request for silence.’

Such exaggerated routines were almost pantomimic and produced stock responses from pupils. However, when performed by a male trainee they appeared comical or camp, adding an additional layer of discipline that could challenge their masculinity.

### **Other male teachers as role models?**

In the pilot study two phrases indicated the discomfort of being the sole man in the English department: ‘I felt ill at ease’ and ‘I didn’t feel at home’. Where they existed in English departments I had expected anomalous male colleagues to be valuable role models. The number of male heads of English departments was disproportionately high and their contact with the male trainees was limited. Male heads of department were seen by the male trainees as having benefited from the patriarchy of male privilege, or the ‘glass escalator’ (Williams, 1992). They were distant figures who did not provide emotional or professional support and repeatedly missed opportunities to support a male colleague. Seidler (1997:8) uses the term ‘cultural homophobia’ for the notion that men need not support other men, as the necessary emotion is culturally positioned as feminine (Shields, 2002). The male heads of department did not perceive the pastoral and nurturing roles of training to be their concern. Barry identified this lack of professional contact and felt aggrieved that he did not receive the nurturing he wanted:

‘No, certainly he didn’t take me under his wing or anything like that.’  
(Barry, Interview 1)

As a trainee Barry learnt that he had no status and therefore could not reproduce the power relationships enacted by the head of department. The anger that Barry subsequently felt towards his male head of department was based on insufficient contact combined with criticism he received for his lack of progress. In the absence of other male English teacher models Barry imitated his didactic and authoritarian teaching style. Indeed, male heads of department were frequently reported to manifest status and power. Taking over classes from a male head of department, presented challenges for the trainees as the pupils associated the power and status of the role with a male teacher. Andy contrasted the discipline styles used by the male head of department (Calum) and female colleagues:

‘I find Calum is more - he is not aggressive in his teaching but when he wants to make a point when he is telling someone off it is BANG! Right like that. And the women are slightly more: “Will you stop doing that?”  
(Andy, Interview 1)

He resorts to using gender stereotypes by suggesting that the male colleague in possession of power can use explosive and dramatic techniques, whilst the female teachers adopt strategies based on irritation and nagging. Sexist attitudes developed when describing how other male English teachers replicated the lack of contact with male heads of department, as expressed by Andy:

‘My professional development has been handled by the girls.’  
(Andy, Interview 3)

Andy’s choice of ‘girls’ undermines and dismisses the efficacy and authority of his female teacher trainers. Other men in the study referred to female trainees and colleagues as ‘girls’ but Andy’s unreconstructed language indicates his perception of women who lacked authority because they are in the caring and nurturing role of being a mentor. More shocking than his choice of language is his male colleagues’ detachment:

‘He is my mentor, but actually I don’t see him very often at all. ... I don’t see him during the day. It is the girls I talk to if I have a problem.’  
(Andy, Interview 3)

Andy's lack of male support led him to position talk about pedagogic problems as a feminine practice.

Often the trainees looked to other subjects to find male teachers. Matt described a male history teacher :

'The teacher I'd like to be - Alec Muffin, History - I don't know that he's eccentric but he's just got this incredibly energetic kind of Ben Eltonesque almost approach.'

(Matt, Interview 1)

Seeing a male teacher entertaining but also teaching and enthusing young people stayed with Matt. Andy remembered a similarly charismatic history teacher when he was a pupil:

'Then the thing that really made me want to do it [teach] was when I saw a young male teacher - brilliant. History teacher at school - he was young, funny, really funny, had total control of the classroom, never shouted, just used humour. Brilliant teacher. I looked up to him and thought - that's just what I want to be. Just like him. Young, cool, funny, confident teacher.'

(Andy, Individual Interview 3)

This description provided Andy with a language to describe himself as a developing teacher.

Henry saw in other male teachers the relaxed qualities he admired:

'The male teachers that I have observed ... are more relaxed, are prepared to let a bit of initial disturbance go without making an issue of it. They are saying: "Come on lads." Being more on side in terms of how to deal with, say a group of disruptive boys than perhaps a female teacher would.'

(Henry, Interview 3)

Adam identified a male drama teacher's 'magic air' and sought out other younger male teachers. Matt believed that watching other men enhanced his learning:

'I think it is difficult in a way when you watch women teach because I don't learn as much as when I have watched men teach and I have watched an awful lot more women teach than I have men.'

(Matt, Interview 3)

During the study Carol, a female trainee, explained the impact of meeting an identifiable role model, after meeting a female head of English and head teacher:

'The fact that the Head of English and the headmistress was a female – two really good role models... I don't need strong female role models but it was really nice to see them there ... it is all very male dominated in careers I've had – you were very much a duty frock and not really appreciated for what was in your head so it is nice to be in a field where you're obviously appreciated for that kind of thing. ... even down (god, I know it's so superficial) the way

she dressed – I turned up thinking would I look like a teacher? I thought, well actually, I'd rather look like that teacher than this teacher, thanks very much. She struck me as really independent and bright and I should imagine her classes were really interesting and that's what I'd rather be like, thank you.'

So Carol saw a female teacher whom she wants to be like. Whilst denying her need for 'strong female role models' she acknowledged the significance of the women, compared with the male dominated careers where she was the token woman or 'duty frock'. Based on the female teachers she saw in school Carol was influenced by the image of the female English teacher against which she juxtaposes her own imagined teacher image. Her vocabulary for her shows a lively and independent female teacher text: 'innovative', 'refreshing', 'different', 'not constrained', 'independent', and 'bright', 'interesting'.

The men could not observe a range of male English teachers. It was important for men to observe and talk to other male teachers, often outside of the English department, in order to receive a range of ways of being a man in the classroom:

'It's helping me, just from a purely observational point of view seeing men, more men, different men teach English. ... I have got different models now I can refer to. ... Ian is very quiet, controlled and calm and he's an excellent teacher. Gareth is not an angry teacher, he has just got a very powerful voice. Just seeing the different techniques. I don't know why it is different to a woman. It just is. Women are different.'

(Andy, Interview 3)

The differences they observed between male and female English teachers caused the men to group together. When talking about another male teacher and himself Matt used 'we', suggesting a unit with shared characteristics:

'We are not the kind of dominant, disciplinarian type - we'd rather do it in another way if it's at all possible. I suppose sometimes, male in a female department - we talk about it. We have got fairly similar attitudes to how we would like to be as a teacher.'

(Matt, Interview 3)

Matt realised he had different conversations with the only other male English teacher and that some of these conversations were about being a male in a predominantly female department and dealing with some stereotypical perceptions.

As the men in the study learnt to become English teachers, they re-negotiated their position of being in the minority, as their gender, perhaps for the first time in their education

careers, was a problem and not an advantage. They redefined their masculinity and saw their work as teachers as different from that of female colleagues. Their change from English students to teachers of English, involved acquiring a vivid sense of their masculinity. Some changes were brought about by the impact of meeting mentors, teachers and pupils. The men experienced a loss of power and centrality when they entered a predominantly female context and had to find new ways of being a teacher and of being a man.

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**Summary** (100-150 words)

This article arises from an ethnographic study of men training to become secondary English teachers on University PGCE courses. The socialisation of male trainee teachers has been researched in the areas of early years and primary schools but has been hitherto overlooked in the secondary sector, in spite of the feminisation of English being widely perceived. More women than men teach English in secondary schools, so initial training takes place in predominantly female English departments. The implications for female mentors, who are largely responsible for the school-based training and assessment of the male trainees, are explored alongside the role played by a minority of male teachers in the English departments. The experience of training forces the men to reconsider their masculinities and to renegotiate their relationships with colleagues, pupils and the subject of English.

**Biographical details**

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