

Exploring Men's Experiences as Elementary School Teachers

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Seven men, beginning their careers as elementary school teachers, talked with us in individual and group interviews about their experiences *as men* working with young children. We identify various issues these men confronted as they attempted to create for themselves a place in a work world traditionally thought more suited to women. Reflecting on their comments and stories, we discuss assumptions and stereotypes about men in non-traditional occupations, and consider whether men have a unique contribution to make to teaching in elementary schools. We conclude that the call for "more men in elementary" oversimplifies complex issues and leaves unexamined the political nature of that call.

Dans le cadre d'entrevues individuelles et en groupe, sept hommes au début de leur carrière d'enseignant au primaire ont parlé avec les auteures de leurs expériences *en tant qu'hommes* travaillant auprès de jeunes enfants. Les auteures identifient les divers problèmes auxquels ces hommes ont fait face en essayant de se tailler une place dans un monde de travail traditionnellement considéré comme mieux adapté à des femmes. Réfléchissant sur leurs commentaires et leurs expériences, les auteures analysent les idées préconçues et les stéréotypes au sujet des hommes dans des professions non traditionnelles et se demandent si les hommes ont quelque chose de spécial à apporter dans l'enseignement au primaire. Elles concluent que l'appel visant à multiplier le nombre d'hommes au primaire simplifie à l'extrême des questions complexes en faisant abstraction de la nature politique de cet appel.

In her critique of research in the sociology of education, Acker (1983) identifies as problematic the absence of good studies on gender relations in teaching; she specifically asks why teaching children "is regarded as an occupation suitable only for women" (p. 134). Her concern is well-placed, for there has been little analysis of whether men have a unique contribution to make to elementary teaching. As a step toward a better understanding of gender relations and the sexual division of labour in teaching, we document seven men's perceptions of their work as elementary teachers and of the issues they confront as they create for themselves a place in a work world focused on children and traditionally seen as more suited to women.

The call for "more men in elementary" has arisen sporadically in Canada and the United States since the 1950s, and is intensifying, especially in Ontario, where the proportion of full-time male elementary public school teachers has declined in the last 10 years from 33% to 26%¹ (Walker, 1992). Support for this

call rests largely on the claim that male teachers serve as role models for boys and father substitutes for children from female-headed, lone-parent families. Voiced most regularly by presidents of the Ontario Public School Teachers' Federation (OPSTF), the affiliate of the Ontario Teachers' Federation representing all male public school teachers in the province² (e.g., Lewis, 1993; Martin, 1989), this claim has both professional and popular support. The Faculty of Education at the University of Toronto, for example, in glossy advertising aimed specifically at men, claims that "the absence of male role models at the elementary school level adversely affects the provision of quality education." School boards, too, publically agree on the need to hire more men for the primary grades. In 1992 hiring projections, the Board of Education for the City of London (Ontario) indicated to prospective applicants that the "Primary Division (Male)" was one area where hiring would occur. School boards identify "male elementary teachers" as a "specialty" where shortages are occurring nationally (Canadian Education Association, 1992).

Significant questions are begged when being *male* is seen as a teaching specialty, when male elementary teachers are valued primarily as role models, and when "quality education" is defined as dependent upon the presence of male teachers. "Despite the impassioned plea for more men in early education," write Robinson, Skeen, and Flake-Hobson (1980), "the data supporting this need . . . [are] weak . . . sparse . . . and inconsistent" (p. 234). Gold and Reis (1982) note that "most of the arguments and research in this area have not attempted to use a theoretical construct, but have relied upon common sense, an *alluring but sometimes untrustworthy guide*" (p. 495, italics added). Their review of research concludes that claims for male elementary teachers as important same-sex role models are not supported empirically: boys who have male teachers do not have fewer problems in school nor are they better adjusted; boys from father-absent homes do not imitate or rely more on male teachers than other boys. Robinson (1981) finds little evidence that more men in elementary schools will counterbalance the "feminized" environment of those schools or enhance boys' learning. Pleck (1981) finds no evidence that female teachers encourage "feminine" pursuits or that boys see school as "feminine." He suggests these notions are more stereotypical than factual, and concludes: "Most of the studies of the effect of the sex of the teacher on student performance examine only boys' performance, *as if this were the only grounds on which to decide* [italics added] whether to increase the proportion of male teachers" (p. 126). Allan's (1993) review of the literature leads him to conclude that calls for "more men in elementary" are based largely on "folk theories" unsupported by research.

By the early 1980s, sex-role theory was "an event in psychology's history" (Pleck, 1987, p. 38), discarded as conceptually unstable, and practically and empirically inadequate (Carrigan, Connell, & Lee, 1987). Segal (1990), acknowledging its superficial appeal, outlines its flaws:

It assumes a consistent and uniform set of social expectations about men and women universally shared within any society, positing a non-existent homogeneity to social life. It supposes a conformity to social expectations . . . , positing a non-existent uniformity of individual behaviour. The complex dynamics of gender identity, at both the social and individual level, disappear in sex role theory, as abstract opinions about “difference” replace the concrete, changing power relations between men and women. Sex-role theory fails to explain either the passion or the pain of rigid adherence to dominant gender stereotypes of some, resilient resistance to them on the part of others, or confused or contradictory combinations of the two in yet others. (p. 69)

Goodman (1987) demonstrates the inadequacy of a theoretical position rationalizing a call for more men in elementary schools solely in terms of role models. Male teachers, he reports, hold widely different views about their roles. Some consciously seek to perpetuate and reinforce traditional, narrowly conceived gender roles for boys and girls; others, recognizing that girls may experience discrimination, adopt a liberal, individualist approach to teaching and define their task as providing equal opportunities for girls to do what boys do. Few male elementary teachers identify themselves as profeminist, or see their roles in terms of an actively anti-sexist pedagogy. Indeed, Goodman and Kelly (1988) suggest that “physical presence is not enough. The need is not for men who simply pass on the traditional male-centred culture unproblematically. To make a significant difference, we need more men who will mediate culture from an anti-sexist perspective” (p. 1).

Goodman’s and Kelly’s (1988) work is part of a growing literature asking men to talk about their work as teachers and making an effort to understand their complex, often contradictory experiences (Allan, 1993; Skelton, 1991). As Morgan (1981) argues, “Taking gender into account is ‘taking men into account’ and not treating them . . . as the normal subjects of research” (p. 93). Layland (1990) reinforces this observation:

The latent effect of seeing feminist research as exclusively about women’s lives is that it allows things male to go uninvestigated, almost as though the idea of the male-as-norm were not being questioned any more. However, we must demystify power and its components, one of which is the production of “masculinity” and “masculine” behaviour. (p. 129)

Studying men who do traditional women’s work—in this case, male elementary teachers—can be particularly informative: in the context of their experiences, “gender is highly problematized and [these men] negotiate the meaning of masculinity every day” (Allan, 1993, p. 114).

We report here on seven men beginning their careers as elementary teachers. All are white and middle class; at the time of the study they ranged in age from 28 to 40. Five were married, four with children. George and Doug taught Grade 1; James, Grade 3; Lee, Grade 3 and Grade 4; Buck; Grade 4; and Dave and

Jerry, Grade 5. Prior to entering the B.Ed. program, George had been a church minister and Doug a counsellor in a boys' home; James had been an architect; Lee had worked on his family's farm and as a research assistant for Agriculture Canada; Buck had worked in construction and in furniture sales and restoration, and as an aide in his mother's special education class; Dave had been a performer and teacher of music; and Jerry had had management training in banking and had taught economics at a community college. These men, bringing such a rich background of work experience to teaching, may be atypical of male elementary teachers. We think it likely, nevertheless, that the issues that arose for them also exist for other men in this profession.

Our primary source of data is a set of transcripts of focused group interviews (Cohen & Manion, 1989) conducted following the close of the men's preservice year and at approximately two-month intervals after that until the end of their first year of teaching. We asked them about their experiences *as men* in their predominantly female education classes and with the predominantly female staffs in the schools where they were first student teachers and later staff teachers. Several kept a log of experiences and incidents they deemed relevant to the theme of the study. We also interviewed each man about his life history.

The men in this study volunteered to participate because they already had some questions about the nature of their work as male elementary teachers. The camaraderie and support promised by the group structure was an incentive as well. We acknowledge that our questions about gender issues and teachers' roles encouraged the men to be more reflective about their personal and professional practice than they might otherwise have been. Doug commented: "Being in the group has certainly coloured my observations and the way I've encountered my experiences. I see more deeply than I otherwise would." George concurred:

Reflecting on the discussion helps to shape [your behaviour]. You think twice about how you're going to approach [something] or how you're going to say something. You reflect back on [things] and say, "I shouldn't have done that." It's all consciousness-raising.

In the sections that follow, we describe and comment on themes arising from a year's discussions with these men. We reflect on assumptions and stereotypes about men in non-traditional occupations, and consider how men might make a unique contribution to elementary teaching.

ENTERING THE PROFESSION

The men expressed various reasons for choosing to teach at the elementary level, although all agreed they enjoyed working with children.

Dave: I have found kids in that age range . . . really exciting to teach. No matter what sort of abilities they had, they were just fun. There is something about the attitude that goes with the age that I find delightful.

Some thought, or at least hoped, that as men they had a particular contribution to make.

Doug: [We can teach children] about the nature of women and . . . men. I think certain ideas are settled . . . in kids at that age . . . for all time — [ideas] about who can nurture and who can't. . . . I'm sure in a lot of homes . . . [children] see . . . women as the nurturers and the father as the man who goes out and provides for the family . . . and unless they get something that opposes that in their education . . . they are going to be stuck with this belief. . . . And everything they learn from then on is going to be conditioned by these deeply held [ideas] about the nature of men and women. To the extent that we can show them a different way — show them [how] to see women and men differently — they are [going to be] more open to expressing themselves, caring about other people, and showing that they care, and [so on]. It's such a small [thing] but important.

Lee: It is in the kids' interest . . . to have male teachers. . . . If you want a society that is not sexist . . . then [school] is a one of the places where we have to . . . [make] changes.

The men saw themselves, by their very presence, demonstrating both an alternative career choice for men and less traditional ideas about what it means to be a man. They saw their contribution consisting “not in ‘acting like a man’ for children, but in disproving the idea that men need to act in some special ‘manly’ way” (Seifert, 1973, p. 168).

Dave, recalling an episode from his student-teaching days, pointed to another reason for choosing to teach at the elementary level:

Those [boys in the class] worked in different ways. . . . And . . . the way they worked and probably always worked will never be valued by the school system. Whereas the way the girls were working . . . was just what we all love to see. . . . [This is] the way I felt about much of *my* elementary schooling. . . . The standard was always the way these girls were working. . . . And everything was compared to that.

Dave wanted to change what teachers tend to value in students, especially what they value in boys—to confront a school culture which, despite research to the contrary (Greenberg, 1985), he saw as detrimental to boys' learning.

Although each man had “taken it for granted” that he might teach young children, friends and family members often thought differently. Doug “never had to justify going into teaching but . . . did have to justify the choice of elementary.” Jerry, attending “bank functions” with his wife, found that

[People] say, “Well, what do you do?”

“I teach school.”

“High school?”

“No, kids 10 or 11 years old.”

“You're kidding; really?” And that's all they say.

The men were not unaware of the “need” for more men in elementary schools, and some were surprised at how few registered at this level in the preservice program. They were even more surprised to find they were among the last to be hired. “I have been told there is a big demand for male teachers,” Jerry said, “[but] I haven’t seen a contract yet.” Expecting to benefit from their privileged status as men, and to be snapped up by school boards, they were frustrated and resentful when it did not happen.

Doug: My interviews have gone well and I have letters saying, “You have been recommended to be hired as soon as possible.” There was a girl [sic] who didn’t get a letter because she had done so poorly on her interview and her academic background was spotty. . . . Then I got the news she had been hired. . . . I just couldn’t believe it. . . . [I was angry] at the system.

Here was an apparent contradiction between the popular notion that more men are wanted in elementary schools, and the actual practice of school boards.

ISSUES OF SEX AND SEXUALITY

Some men found themselves welcomed enthusiastically by hiring committees and colleagues; others sensed an unspoken suspicion about sexual orientation. “Why do you want to teach elementary school?” interviewers asked, but in tones that suggested the real question was, “Is there something wrong with you?”

Buck: The first question I was asked was, “Why [elementary]?” All of a sudden I felt like I was defending myself against these three people. It was like a tag team—attack the male.

George: In one instance it was very blatant: a woman [principal] . . . who had difficulty with a man coming into primary and who wondered what was wrong with me, which was very unsettling.

Other teachers, principals, and acquaintances were also suspicious, sometimes openly and explicitly.

Jerry: I had a teacher say to me, “Why are you going into high school? You’ve taught at [a Community College]?” I said, “No, I’m going into [elementary].” “You’re going to teach little kids?” I said, “Yes.” She said, “Are you queer?”

Such references to sexual orientation hint at unfortunate misconceptions about men, masculinity, and homosexuality, which the men resented.

Buck: It was like, “[Do] you desire little girls?” and that’s what really annoys me about the whole thing. . . .

As Acker (1983) claims, men who teach children “run the risk of being branded as sexually deviant” (p. 134).

The issue of male sexuality arose in other ways. How to show affection appropriately was a particular concern, since OPSTF guidelines caution men about touching children. Buck questioned those guidelines strenuously:

Why is it . . . the women teachers are hugging the boys and girls but I have been told I have to be really careful about that . . . ? I don't feel I should have to—[if there's] a little kid that's fallen and hit her head and she's crying—that I [should] have to catch the attention of another teacher [before I can] comfort her. . . . Am I allowed to do this or not?

The men soon came to believe concerns about touching had been overly magnified, and that, in Lee's words, “You can still be a mature, normal human being and not worry about law suits . . . in this profession.” “What was most noticeable about [being a] male [teacher],” Buck commented, “was most of the time it wasn't a big deal.” Nevertheless, his sexuality was inescapable.

Buck: [It was only] when we went swimming and . . . you get your clothes off . . . then [you get] the comments. . . . It is when you get down to what you do in physical education that I notice it more. The girls were talking more and coming around. When you get the clothes off—it was kind of interesting actually.

As he talked, Buck suddenly seemed to realize what he was saying and quickly protested, “There was nothing sexual, God help me. . . . They just don't often see a male walking around in a bathing suit.”

Increasing evidence of male sexual abuse of children has led to closer scrutinizing of the conduct of male teachers, and Buck's hasty denial of any sexual aspect to his relationships with students is understandable. Wolpe (1988) has observed that, in general, teachers neither see nor acknowledge the part human sexuality plays in teacher-student relations. Certainly, none of the men in our study chose to discuss sexuality in the context of teaching, although we wonder if they might have done so with male researchers. Societal fears and contradictory messages about male sexuality undoubtedly serve to suppress any conscious analysis of this aspect of human relationships in the context of teaching.

OTHER TEACHERS' VIEWS OF MALE PRIMARY TEACHERS

Men who expressed interest in teaching primary grades encountered explicit discouragement from other teachers, both male and female.

Doug: I started to sense . . . that . . . the female . . . teachers . . . [thought] there was something wrong with a male wanting to teach elementary; that kids at that age

need to be hugged and . . . [males] are not going to be able to hug kids. . . . I hear it expressed as blatantly as that and [I feel] a real resentment. . . . So you hear one thing — [men] should be in elementary — then you hear . . . the exact opposite — kids need to be mothered, they need things men can't give them. What is going on here?

Jerry: I was told by a female teacher who had been teaching 13 years that men can't teach primary. . . . She said men are not willing to run up and wipe a dirty nose . . . or lace a boot . . . or locate a lost mitt. She said, "You just won't make it there."

Conceptions of men as unable or unwilling to care for young children (Seifert, 1988) have more than a hint of biological determinism about them, and run counter to the men's conceptions of themselves.

As a Grade 1 teacher, George found that no one really believed he could be committed to teaching young children:

One reaction I have had from male colleagues . . . is the suggestion that once I get this year behind me I would like to "move up" . . . and I say, "Oh, no, I'm hoping I'll be so good they'll keep me right here." . . . I [told them] I had had a chance to take a higher grade and chose this one. Then they look at [me] as if [I am] making it up.

There is maybe a bit of a sense that it's right for the women to have the primary grades and . . . that [I am] there for a year but [am] not really serious as a primary teacher and so [they think], "You'll go, and why don't you, because you don't really care about primary that much."

At the beginning of the year, George had found the primary teachers "very supportive," but even at the end of the year he could "still sense in the staff room . . . that they are not completely used to [a man in Grade 1]":

I get the sense that these women are trying to sweep the primary division clean — which really bothers me because I keep thinking I have done a credible job and they are not looking at that side of it.

I really think some of them think this has been just a flash in the pan — that the old boy [the principal] made a mistake last year. It really hurts because I don't want to move.

And, George thought he knew *why* the other primary teachers wanted him to go:

They want [the classrooms] back because that's the way it was. . . . It's the room, and they want the grade. It is very specific what they are after. And they want that kitchen centre back, too. And those slates over there. . . . [Those supplies] came with the room, but they want them back.

Indeed, Acker (1983) has suggested that female primary teachers, having carved out an area of influence, may "[hold] on to it as one of the few arenas in which

they [can] exert any power, even at the expense of further reinforcing stereotypes about women's sphere" (p. 134).

MEN'S VIEWS OF FEMALE TEACHERS AND OTHER MALE TEACHERS

The tensions and contradictions of gender politics in schools were reflected in the men's views of other teachers, particularly the female teachers. The men acknowledged the unrecognized contribution women make to education, and the support many female teachers offered them as first-year teachers. They also saw the "old boys' network" still operating. "Really," Dave observed, "it is not fair by any objective standard . . . the way women are treated in education." Doug's wife had just been passed over for an appointment as department head in a local high school:

There is a lot of stupidity in education . . . it's no wonder they . . . have to pay school boards to hire women principals because they [i.e., the boards] are too stupid to run their own. So they say, "Here's \$5,000; hire a woman if you can." So they go out and look for a woman to hire. But they still think they're not hiring the best person because they have no gender-neutral idea of what qualifies as best.

In recognizing the effect of gender on internal occupational segregation, Dave and Doug confirmed research on what happens when men enter women's work domains. Williams' (1989) study of male nurses, for example, shows that although there are contradictory and sometimes negative responses to men in nursing, "differential treatment of male and female nurses often *benefits* men . . . giving them greater prestige and more autonomy" (p. 90). Indeed, Williams (1992) notes that for men in the "female" professions, "their gender is construed as a *positive* difference" (p. 259).

The men in our study did see themselves as different from female teachers.

Doug: People . . . [think] my job is . . . to do the same job a woman would do. . . . I think that is totally wrong . . . I'm not striving to do what a woman would do . . . because women make a lot of mistakes. They do a lot of harmful things to kids. . . . They say all kinds of things they shouldn't be saying about what boys should do and what girls should do.

However, these men also saw themselves as different from other *male* teachers, most of whom they characterized as "traditional" males. Disdaining staffroom talk in general, they perceived the men to be interested only in sports, women in shopping. Dave described the Friday ritual at his school: a few male teachers went to a local "strip joint" for lunch, some of the women to a restaurant. Both groups invited Dave to join them but he refused either "to go and drink at lunch, let alone go into one of those places," or to join the women. Although he was

not “one of the boys,” he was not so disloyal to his sex as to become “one of the girls” either.

CONFRONTING THE STEREOTYPES

Given the conventional wisdom that more men are needed in elementary schools to serve as role models, it is not surprising to find the men in our study using language consistent with this perspective. All were concerned about their colleagues’ narrow definitions of what it means to be a man or a woman. For example, each man found that the (male) principal or a (female) teacher in the school would say something like, “Oh, good, we’ve got a man on staff to do the phys. ed.” This stereotyping was irksome to all of the men, but especially to the two who disliked teaching physical education.

Some of the men made conscious efforts to challenge the stereotypes, particularly the definitions of women’s work and men’s work prevailing among students and staff. Doug’s colleagues, male and female, were amused when he took his turn doing the dishes in the staffroom. The other male teacher on staff simply sent some female students down to do the dishes when it was his turn and, Doug reported, “Everybody thinks that is perfectly fine.” Doug encouraged his students to question such sexual division of labour, using the authority of his male voice to instruct them: “I start with my grade ones; I tell them women can be mathematicians and scientists, and men can do the dishes.” The other men were also careful not to stereotype work by gender, allocating boys their share of cleaning up and serving food, and girls their share of moving desks and digging soil for science.

The men believed they served as role models “just by being there.” George, who taught Grade 1, noticed a change in the attitudes and behaviours of Grade 6 boys over the year. Initially, George noticed, “a lot of the older kids had difficulty” with a male teacher hugging little children, and playing with them in the schoolyard; but “for them not to be making silly comments about it in June shows something must have happened along the way.” By the end of the year, Grade 6 boys were approaching George:

They would say it really fast: “If you want me to come in, I will come in, I’ll help you.” Then [I] would have to find something for them to do, to respond positively. Otherwise you haven’t made any gains, if you can’t foster it. . . . I think they wanted to show another side of themselves and probably felt safer doing it in a classroom out of the flow of their peers—they didn’t have to stand up in an auditorium and say something geeky or anything. . . .

Several of the men thought it important to let students see men feeling “emotional.” A children’s story had moved Lee to tears when he was reading it aloud and the class remembered the incident in June when again he showed outward

emotion at the farewell party for his teaching partner. Buck told his students he always cried during *Bambi*. These men thought it important to “let [children] see a man in a different light, a different role. . . .”

Men’s separation from the work of child-bearing and child-rearing has been linked to the development and persistence of patriarchy and male dominance, and has led to the view that gender relations might be transformed and men become more caring and “connected” if only they would become more deeply involved in fathering and child care work (Chodorow, 1978; Grumet, 1988; O’Brien, 1981; Stockard & Johnston, 1980). Thus, many people, including the men in our study, believe that men working with children in schools is a step toward gender equality. Hearn (1987), however, has examined the relationship between the professions and the construction of masculinity, and suggests that although male professionals in such fields as teaching may exhibit more “liberal” models of masculinity than do other men, there is no guarantee that bringing more men into the caring professions would fundamentally alter the structural inequities of a male-dominated society. In fact, Hearn (1987) warns, increasing men’s involvement with reproductive work in the family and in such institutions as schools may only serve to extend male control of women and children. Nevertheless, “working with others’ emotions and one’s own emotions [as in teaching] can for some men challenge and question traditional models of masculinity and their own masculinity in a more thoroughgoing way” (Hearn, 1987, p. 144).

Although all the men in our study saw themselves as different from “traditional macho” or “jock” male teachers, they were, in many instances, explicitly advised to *use* a stereotypical masculinity for disciplining students. “You are a male, and you have to use it,” Buck’s vice-principal told him. Admitting they were not as good at discipline as experienced female teachers, the men resisted being identified as disciplinarians just because they were men, but the struggle was especially difficult for Buck and Dave, who were employed in schools known to be “tough”:

Buck: If . . . at home . . . the father is the disciplinarian, then they are more inclined to accept you as that at the school. Right off the bat you are on the wrong foot. But I was told to use that. That is one of the realities of that school.

MASCULINITY AS A TEACHING RESOURCE

By the end of the year, “the realities of the school” had shaped the men in our study in different ways. In one conversation, Dave and Buck recognized their own “traditional” masculinity and how they used it at school:

Dave: There are some things I thought I had put behind me. . . . I used to be an extremely aggressive hockey player . . . extremely aggressive . . . and I found that all that was still there somewhere—I had just been ignoring it and not

using it. . . . [Then I found myself] using all the same kinds of things in a different way. I don't throw people into the boards or up against the wall any more . . . not [in] that same physical sense, but [I use] the same kind of aggressiveness in the classroom.

Buck: That's funny, because I get that, too. And I haven't [felt that way] since I played hockey a long time ago . . . the pulse pounding and the concentration on something. And, you know, it scares the hell out of kids. Like . . . when we had the gun scare and [Alan] was trying to get out the window and I said, "You will sit and you will sit now!" and he must have known because he just sat right down and was quiet. . . . It was kind of neat.

Dave: The kids know when you cross the line. . . . They know they can't push you any further. . . . They know where the power lies, and they are more than a little bit afraid of what you *might* do to them.

Buck: It's the same psych game you use to stare down somebody on the ice. The same game.

Dave: *Exactly* the same game, and those kids know they are not going to win.

In Canada, hockey symbolizes much that is taken to be quintessentially male so it is not surprising these two men should find the game providing an apt metaphor for their "face-offs" in the classroom. Their ambivalence ("It was kind of neat"/"I thought I had put [it] behind me") and their excitement as they discovered a mutual approach to discipline based on male aggression in sports reinforces the notion that something deeper is going on with men in the classroom than can be accounted for in an unexamined theory about role models. More fundamental questions about power, authority, dominance, control, and gender relations must be explored.

Consider the following description of a male teacher-male student encounter. The boys wanted to play basketball and Buck complied:

I went out and ran around like a maniac for 45 minutes playing basketball . . . and we were slapping hands and all the male bonding stuff, and it worked. . . . Showing that you know where they're sort of at . . . with the male sex thing works. These kids followed me around after that . . . just because I played a little B-Ball. . . . You have to perform as a male.

Buck is clearly thinking of "performing as a male" in this instance within a somewhat narrowly defined concept of masculinity. He is talking also about male bonding, male solidarity, the homosociability of a male group based on a recognition of shared male interests. The key question is not so much what kind of role model he is, but what he might choose to do with his new-found bond with the boys. Were he to draw on the bond to work actively *against* the negative

aspects of male group behaviour, and turn the relationship to good use through a consciously anti-sexist pedagogy, he would demonstrate how men might make a special contribution to teaching.

The question of pedagogy, however, anti-sexist or otherwise, was not central for the men in our group. They were more focused on surviving their first year, believing the best they could do was to model a liberal masculinity. Even that was difficult, they found, because the organization of the school, the expectations of staff and students, and their own socialization as men made it easy to slip back into older, more familiar patterns of gendered behaviour. As George said after he realized people were staring at him, a middle-aged man skipping rope with little children, "I thought, 'Maybe I'll just stop,' and then I thought, 'Well, maybe I won't.' But you have to push yourself. You have to consciously decide to carry on what you're doing." Another observed:

You get very defensive . . . being in a new profession and being in a strange part of that profession. All sorts of things well up in you, and you attribute causes where they don't belong. . . . It is very difficult to make sense of it all.

Indeed, when asked specifically whether more men should enter elementary teaching, and what special gifts they might bring to it, the men did not advocate a general policy. Although they believed they had, individually, contributed to the well-being of students, they were less optimistic about the contributions of men in general. James provided the firmest statement:

Well, no, I don't think there should be more male teachers in the classroom unless males decide to do it not because they are males. . . . It is an individual personal journey that has to be made and if this were a healthy society, chances are it would be more or less 50:50 that would be in the classroom but I think quotas encouraging men to go in could be very dangerous. I think that could be very dangerous.

James' view was grounded in his conception of teaching as a vocation, not just a job. Although the other men understood the question in less metaphysical terms, they nonetheless shared James' misgivings and, based on their own experiences and observations, found few reasons to argue the case for "more men in elementary."

CONCLUSION

At the end of the school year, several men received complimentary notes and comments from parents, most of which made some reference to their being male. The men themselves were reluctant to attribute their success to their sex or to claim they made a difference in children's lives *because they were male*. They found it difficult to describe, discuss, or assess in a sustained way what it means

to be a man and to work with children, probably partly because they lack the language to do so (Tolson, 1987). "It is very difficult to make sense of it all," one said. Indeed, by challenging, however modestly, the gender assumptions embedded in the organizational structure of elementary schools (Acker, 1990, 1992; Mills, 1992) and the gender assumptions built into the work of elementary school teaching (Williams, 1993), the men had experienced a series of contradictions in their work lives. Valued as that rare commodity, men in elementary teaching, their motives, abilities, and sexuality were nonetheless often viewed with suspicion. Taking up non-traditional work as a way to question and confront gender relations, they faced enormous pressures to conform to traditional notions of masculinity which then only reinforced traditional patterns of sex differentiation.

Placing more men in elementary teaching without asking why ignores complex questions about the structural dimensions of gender relations in schools. The call for "more men in elementary" is, in essence, a political call; very different agendas are involved. As Hearn (1987) suggests, bringing more men into elementary schools might only extend men's power and control over women, and reinforce existing gender regimes. On the other hand, bringing men in has the potential of allowing women and men to engage together in anti-sexist teaching practices and to challenge the gendered process of schooling. Until the purposes for "more men in elementary" are clarified, individual men will continue to experience the contradictions of doing "women's work" and being "real men" at the same time.

NOTES

¹ In contrast, the proportion of men in elementary (K-6) teacher education programs in Ontario has risen from 10% in 1987/88 to 18% in 1992/93. Whether this increase reflects the success of a campaign by the Ontario Public School Teachers' Federation (see note 2) to attract more men into elementary school teaching, a temporary response by men to changing economic realities and contractions in the labour market, or merely the usual range of fluctuations in faculty enrolments is unclear.

² In Ontario, the by-laws of the Ontario Teachers' Federation assign teachers to membership in one of five affiliates. Female teachers employed in elementary public schools are members of the Federation of Women Teachers' Associations of Ontario, whereas male teachers employed in the same schools are members of the Ontario Public School Teachers' Federation. All teachers working in separate schools are members of the Ontario English Catholic Teachers' Association, and teachers in French-language schools belong to the Association des enseignantes et des enseignants franco-ontariens. Secondary school teachers are members of the Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation.

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