



## EQUALITY, INCLUSION AND OPPORTUNITY: CONTEMPORARY IRISH SCHOOLS AND MODERN MASCULINITIES

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### Abstract:

The notion of equality is central to European public life. Yet, equality is a concept with as many definitions as it has varied use. Traditionally, equality in education focused on access to schooling and on boys' underachievement. As globalised education systems are becoming increasingly socially, culturally and politically diverse, it is important to consider equality in education in relation to the school as a workplace. Employing a feminist research design and focusing specifically on the lives of five Irish male primary teachers, this article unpacks a number of assumptions relating to equality and masculinities. Many of these assumptions are discreet, which allow for inequalities to be created and maintained. In this context, discussions surrounding informal barriers will be explored in relation to teacher education colleges and the staffroom. The study's findings show that the number of males entering teaching is static against a rising number of female entrants. Furthermore, male teachers within the profession feel isolated due to various forces. These forces are not neutral occurrences or natural economic patterns. Gender plays a pivotal role in this ideological drama. This article will be of particular interest to those educationalists interested in promoting gender equality in schools.

**Keywords:** gender, masculinities, feminist research, primary education

### 1. Introduction

Concepts of equality, inclusion and opportunity - the central principles through which education and schooling have come to be understood in modern society - have been

central to educational discourse in recent years. Personal concerns and social structures direct common belief to the relationship between education and the larger society. The education system is considered, both globally and locally, to be a major public asset that shapes the kind of society that is coming into being. Yet, as American educationalist Michael Apple (2013) notes, the concept of the school has fallen on hard times. Political rhetoric and academic texts consider the school in contradictory ways; as key elements in the causes of our problems and key sites in resolving those issues (Apple, 2013: 4). The dominant discourse in Irish educational discourse, in relation to pupils, has been that of equality of opportunity. However, (in)equality of opportunity vis-à-vis Irish male primary teachers has a more recent history, which will be examined in detail in this article.

Globalised education systems are becoming increasingly socially, culturally and politically diverse. Policies, practices and ideologies of education have come to define themselves in terms of profit, which in turn help define and determine ways in which social justice is perceived and acted out. In the process of marketisation, the very idea of democracy has been altered so that it is 'no longer seen as a political concept, but an economic one' (Apple, 2012: xxv). Against this economic backcloth, schools often become a space for political intervention (Haywood and Mac and Ghail, 2013). In order to understand the complicated connections between a socially just and caring education and mounting social and ideological demands placed on schools, it is important to consider the school as a workplace as well as for its teaching. This manuscript begins with an overview of contemporary debates and controversies surrounding global schooling and modern masculinities. Owing to their extensive contribution to the discourse on contemporary educational research, due attention will be paid to the works of Michael Apple, Chris Haywood and Máirtín Mac and Ghail, and Kathleen Lynch.

## **2. Crises and cultural context: contemporary debates and controversies**

The concept of masculinities has traditionally been defined in terms of crises associated with boys' underachievement, the violence of homophobia, the underrepresentation of males in caring occupations, the traditions of laddism, and opinions of misused talent. Indeed, crisis is a word much loved by journalists due to its ability to stir moral panic among citizens. Apple (2013: 1) considers 'crisis talk' to be 'over-used in books that seek to deal with issues of crucial public importance'. However, he notes that 'this is a time when such talk seems almost understated' where 'the cuts in school funding, the utter disrespect shown in policy and the media toward teachers, ... the list could be extended

as far as the eye can see ...the crisis is palpable' (Apple, 2013: 1). This crisis cannot fully be explained in economic terms but by a social whole. The fact that the number of males entering teaching is static and that male teachers within the profession feel isolated due to various forces are not neutral occurrences. They are not natural economic patterns. In order to address the reason why masculinities in Irish and European primary schools does not count as knowledge requires us to think '*relationally*' (Apple, 1996: 24, italics in original). In other words, the lack of interest in men in teaching is the result of cultural, economic and political conflicts, compromises and tensions that organise society (Apple, 1996). Men in teaching, including the static number of male entrants and the concern of those within the profession, is considered an issue of little concern, importance and validity in society today.

### 3. Participants' Reasons for Participating in a Study of Male Teachers

We begin by introducing the participants in this study whose words and worlds form the basis of this paper. A number of male primary teachers who agreed to participate in this study, offered to write their own introduction or prologue. Where this was not possible, the introduction was written by the researcher based on the information supplied by the participant teacher. Each teacher also chose either to use a pseudonym or to keep his own name. The following illustrate what five participant teachers expected from their participation in this research project.

David: *"Taking part in the research appealed to me because it gives me the opportunity to reflect on the issue of gender imbalance in teaching. It hasn't been spoken about before, that's very evident. Previously, the skewed gender distribution of teachers was a matter that I accepted rather than questioned."*

Dan: *"I would be very happy to participate. It is applicable to me as I have taught in Senior Infants for the past two years, in two different schools, being the only male teacher on staff on each occasion."*

Michael: *"I'd be interested in making a contribution to your study. I only have my own views and possibly some anecdotes around the issue of men (and boys) in education. I'm interested in this area and I think you're doing a very valuable job. I feel that further studies such as this are needed and should be encouraged."*

Neil: *"I have been teaching for fifteen years in both rural and urban schools. Currently I am shared between two schools: one is an all-boys school. The other is a mixed school. In all cases it's overwhelmingly female, a predominantly female environment."*

Matthew: *"I'd be very interested in taking part in your research about males in teaching. I've been teaching for eight years in a large school where there is pretty much 50:50*

*male: female ratio, which is fairly unusual. Just thought it might add another dimension to the research!"*

Taken individually and collectively, these concise profiles suggest that at some deep level all our lives are homogenous and that there are connections as well as separations in the lived experiences of all teachers. In this way universal and singular gender positionality are always linked and integrated and emergent patterns potentially develop simultaneously within and across social categories.

### **3. Crises and cultural context: providing a historical overview**

From its beginnings in an industrial society, the school has evolved and changed into today's post-industrial school, fulfilling a radically different role to the school whose primary aim was the production of numerate and literate workers essential to the operation of an industrial society. The song *'The School Around The Corner Is Still The Same'* may have a resonance with readers of a certain age but its sentiments mask some of the more subtle yet far-reaching changes, which have occurred in Irish schools over the last half century. Global forces impacting on education and masculinities are premised on conflict, resistance and contradictions (Haywood and Mac an Ghail, 2013: 61). For instance, the school may be considered to have a 'humanistic' design, one that Gramsci (1971: 26) considers as developing in each individual 'the fundamental power to think and ability to find one's way in life'. However the school, at varying levels, has also been created to serve 'entire professional sectors' (p. 26) that creates 'for itself cultural associations of its own' (p. 27). A tension emerges from this contradiction, described by Apple (2013: 55) to be an inconsistency between '... child-centeredness and overt political commitments'. The challenge of a 'bureaucratic body' (Gramsci, 1971: 27), which produces an 'artificial boundary' (Apple, 2013: 55) between the global and the individual marks education out as a site of conflict and struggle between conservative restoration and neoliberal agendas. Such themes of analysis provide a conceptual space in which to explore the intra-action between education and masculinities. On the one hand, processes of globalisation produce educational spaces '...in which global compressions of masculinity converge' and on the other hand rework '...distinct formations of masculine subjectivity' (Haywood and Mac an Ghail, 2013: 60). Yet, it is important to view globalisation as acting through or intra-acting with masculinities and not just acting *upon* it (p. 60). One of the characteristics of globalisation intra-acting with masculinities is the emergence of neoliberal masculine discourses that shapes educational policies and practices. In relation to education policies in Ireland, this creates a dominant form of knowledge that assumes that 'policy makers should focus

more on the quality of entrants to the profession rather than whether they are male or female' (Drudy, 2009: 167). Declining numbers of male teachers is not a policy concern within Irish education as neoliberal policies promote competition and entrepreneurialism while shaping 'individual subjectivities based on ... global market demand' (Haywood and Mac an Ghail, 2013: 62). The notion that effective teachers should be recruited regardless of their gender underpins neoliberal masculine assumptions about what is 'rational' (Apple, 2013: 15). The rightist movement has been very effective in moving the blame of unemployment and the loss of economic competitiveness away from economic, cultural, and social policies to the school and other public agencies (p. 28). 'It assumes that self-interest and competitiveness are the energies of creativity' forcing 'all people to conform to what at first could only pretend to be true' (p. 30 – 31). Gender plays an active role in this ideological drama. Official knowledge suggests that efficient, high-calibre teachers, which echoes the competitive and efficient masculinist rhetoric of neoliberalism, should be employed without consideration given to gender that is considered a predominately feminist concern.

#### **4. Qualitative feminist inquiry as research method**

The method of inquiry utilized in this study is a tailored version of the long interview (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2015; McCracken, 1988; Spradley, 1979). The research was designed to consist of three interconnected yet distinct phases of individual interviews. Phase One began on a personal level, exploring why primary teaching appealed to each participant; staffroom interactions; and perceptions of care. Phase Two and Phase Three focused on the theme of gendered bodies: 1) teaching as a vocation; 2) society's view of the school; and 3) the current labour market. The American anthropologist, James P. Spradley's (1979) 'ethnographic interview' was used to guide informal interviews during Phase One. This ethnographic interview shares many features with a conversation-building format in which the researcher slowly and judiciously introduces a number of thematic and focusing questions. Phase One was not intended to reveal new or unusual experiences for male teachers. Yet, it was the familiar appeal of each story and the unfolding of each story that was significant in this early phase of the research project. An example of a familiar narrative is offered by David, who describes a time when he was asked to retrieve a ball that had fallen into a stream that flowed by the school.

David: *"I was asked to go in with wellingtons and try and fish out the ball. I don't know why they thought I would be a good person to get the ball back?"*

In fact, the majority of the participants in the study expressed times when they have been given extra tasks to carry out by female colleagues. These tasks are always outside of their professional brief but which they are expected to carry out because they are men. Gender, in these cases, appears to make two jobs out of one (Hochschild, 2012). Neil narrates gender inequality encountered at work.

Neil: *"There was a dead bird outside the school gate and I was asked to move it ... it could still be there for all I know because I didn't move it. I said "No, why are you asking me to move it?" ... I didn't hear of it anymore."*

Grant McCracken's (1988) 'long interview' was used to guide semi-structured interviews during Phase Two and Phase Three. The long interview is set within a generous time frame and allows participants to tell their own stories in their own terms. This technique enabled emerging themes to be explored in greater detail. As a feminist poststructural study, this research does not seek to uncover generalizable characteristics to draw conclusions about the larger population. For example, this study investigates the everyday realities of masculinities for five male teachers. It does not make overall generalizations about all men who teach young children. Instead, it is an attempt to understand how this group of men experience masculinities in a female-dominated environment. This research was designed to counter the silence that has surrounded men in Irish primary schools as it explores what can be learned from the perspectives of male primary teachers about caring, gender, relationships and masculinities in relation to primary teaching in Ireland.

## **5. Findings: Inclusion - informal barriers**

### **Theme 1: Teacher education colleges**

The fact that men are greatly underrepresented in education at primary level offers them both advantages and disadvantages related to their gender. In this section, I focus on two disadvantages that were continuously raised by all five teachers. The first relates to experiences as pre-service teachers in teacher education colleges. Michael, an administrative Principal, recounts a story from his experiences in the 1980s. David, a substitute teacher, and Tim, an infant teacher, offer a more modern version of the same divide described by Michael. Michael's experience of teacher education college in the 1980s highlights the realities of non-formal barriers that exist for male teachers. Lynch and O'Neill (1994) outline a minimalist conception of equality that should not prevent any persons from entry to education and employment on the grounds of gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity disability or any other irrelevant characteristic. Michael's story sharply brings this conception into question with regard to gender entry patterns.

Michael: *"So, for example, there were no showers for the men or the boys, whatever we were at the time, in the college ... There was a hall, a gym, there so we were always kicking ball or playing basketball or something. Then the head nun commented that we smelled from time-to-time so they actually got the showers in...."*

The relational realities of nurturing constitute a concealed site of social practice through which inequalities are created (Lynch, 2013: 173). Such a discrete site, which is obvious in Michael's story, is the lack of basic facilities for male pre-service teachers. To a large extent, formal barriers to equal access and participation in education and employment have been removed since Ireland joined the European Union in 1973. However, some exceptions remain as the invisible and indeterminate nature of indirect discrimination makes it a difficult issue to address (Lynch, 1999). Interestingly, Michael was one of seven male students in that year. In the entire teacher education college, there were 10 male students and 65 female students. The teacher education college in question was on the same grounds as an all-female secondary school, a "Montessori college" and a "Home Economics college", all united by the same denominational status. As Michael remembers, *"So we were going into this complex every day with well over a thousand girls and ten lads"*. Significantly, each building was separated into distinct areas, *"You were walled off, you know? You didn't have any other influences"*.

A more recent example of gender separation within teacher education colleges is offered by David, who remarks a gender divide within lecture theatres.

David: *"You would have one side that was predominantly male and the other side was predominantly female. One of the lectures made a remark about it saying it's like a dance hall in the '50's"*.

In spite of differences in the pattern of economic development, in political structures and in the types of ethno-national differentiation of the 1980s and 2000s, a common cultural phenomenon still exists between a division of the sexes among pre-service teachers. An analysis of both implies that the feminization of teaching is a historical process as much as it is a social, psychological or an educational one (Drudy, 2009: 165). One striking feature about schools in Ireland has been the role of philanthropy and the idealism of "patrons" to serve a local community. Although the churches, in particular the Catholic Church, have played a central role in the formation and development of Irish education, the churches have received scant attention as a social force in Irish education (Drudy and Lynch, 1993). The separation of religion from the "secular" life of a country is not always clear cut (Tuohy, 2013). There are often unexamined assumptions or practices in the organization of a society that are based on a religious approach that was embedded in a historical context (Tuohy, 2013: 135).

## **Theme 2: The staffroom**

Concerns regarding staffroom isolation and professional communication were common topics for the teachers in this study. One important part of staffroom discussion highlights segregated sex roles. This is particularly evident in the stories the male teachers recounted of female conversation topics, which revolved around children, clothes and jewellery. David and Darren reveal similar accounts of staffroom isolation.

David: *"I do go in there but sometimes, sometimes you go through lunch-times without saying anything because they are talking about stuff that I don't really care about, pregnancy and stuff, debs dresses..."*

Darren: *Um, I suppose it's not the greatest place for a male, really. You would have to zone out at different times I suppose or, you know, you would lose interest in the conversation. I suppose it can be quite isolating at times as well. Last year there was such a big group of them, they all had their own cliques of maybe three or four people and you can find yourself on your own a lot of the time as well. You can either be very much on your own or you can be very much the centre of attention, I suppose. "*

Along with stories of staffroom isolation, Michael recounts another isolation story of a past school he worked in.

Michael: *"...that was my very first posting and I'll never forget it. It was in an all-girls school ... it was a huge school. There was twenty-five teachers or something in it, you know, and that was a very unusual dynamic ... That was a very funny dynamic. I mean it was like I was a specimen then to be honest as well. Which, certainly for the children, I would have been a specimen because there was this man walking around the school and then for the staff, I don't know, I presume I might have been a specimen as well, 'Oh my God. We have a male'."*

The assumptions presented by Michael are the result of his discursive construction as a male teacher. However, it is further produced and reinforced in the history of care and children, whereby attributions of care have tended to shape or have been shaped by public perceptions of care. This assumption is further reinforced as care was traditionally considered to be 'intuitive, instinctive, a function of anatomy coupled with destiny' for women (Gilligan, 1993: 17). Furthermore, Gilligan's (1993) theory connects language with voice, believing that the care voice is 'thematically feminine' and 'is associated with culturally defined feminine values' (As cited in Hekman, 2005: 125). The male teachers presented here cannot escape gender as 'a shifting and contextual phenomenon' that is a point of convergence 'among culturally and historically specific sets of relations' (Butler, 1990: 14). As teaching is considered a "soft option" career for men (Connell, 1985) and an essentially feminine occupation rather than a masculine one, the masculinity of male teachers is continuously in doubt. Male teachers are constantly aware of others' attention to their maleness (Thornton, 1997, as



cited in Skelton, 2001: 127). Similarly, Haywood and Mac an Ghaill (2013: 14) state that men occupy a hegemonic masculinity “or assert a position of superiority” by “winning the consent of other males... in order to secure their (hegemonic) legitimacy”.

Furthermore, Bradley (2013: 157) claims, even in situations of warmth and companionship “embodied masculinity remains on display”. Just as Tim understands male teachers’ unwillingness to broaden the topic of conversation as a fear of portraying too much femininity, “You can’t give off any viable femininity in your personality or your character or else you would have to assert your masculinity”, Bradley (2013: 157) notes that where friendship groups are heterosexual, a wariness remains about possible misinterpretations of emotionality. Through the manipulation of gendered power relationships at micro-political level, the traditional model of male dominance is turned on its head.

Tim: “I can see it in them, that they would have to portray I am the man. I am a man here in this job. I do what men do ... I will talk like a man, I will walk like a man, I will teach like a man and I don’t get that. We are all teaching the very same way.”

## 6. Discussion

### 6.1 A Homogenous Body of Teachers

One of the most significant characteristics of the Irish primary teaching demographic today is that it is overwhelmingly female and drawn largely from a professional or farming background with large numbers having attended a girls’ secondary school (Darmody and Smyth, 2016: 100). Primary teachers in 21<sup>st</sup> century Ireland are a highly homogenous group (Darmody and Smyth, 2016; Drudy, 1999), possibly more so now than at any time before. Gender is one of the most obvious indicators of this homogeneity with females making up 84% of all Primary teachers in 2015. While many countries have struggled with attracting and retaining high calibre candidates, it has always been a cause of great pride in Irish educational circles that the status of teaching in Ireland remains high. This is certainly borne out by the CAO data which shows that entry to the undergraduate B.Ed. programme continues to attract candidates of very high academic standing with a significant number of entrants gaining 500 Leaving Cert points or more (Darmody and Smyth, 2016: xi). On a socio-economic level, all the evidence suggests that today’s teachers tend to be drawn heavily from professional or farming backgrounds. Only 5% of entrants to Bachelor of Education programmes attended designated disadvantaged schools; half the level for comparable Arts/ Social Sciences degree programmes. Furthermore, only 3% of entrants came through the alternative qualifications route, in comparison to the 15% for Arts/Social Sciences

degree programmes (Darmody and Smyth, 2016: 100). Social control can be a normative measure that both persuades and constrains individual choice of workers. Normative measures act as operations of power. Butler (1999: xxii) describes a normative account of gender as judgements made on acceptable and unacceptable expressions of gender.

## 6.2 The inclusive school

The 2011 Irish population census recorded a total of 544,357 non-Irish residents, which equates to 11.4% of the population. This represented a 29.7% increase for the same cohort in the 2006 Census. Again, only a tiny number of entrants to the B.Ed. programme are non-Irish and compares poorly to the 8% of non-Irish entrants to comparable Arts/Social Sciences programmes (Darmody and Smyth, 2016: 101). Traditionally, the heavy recruitment of candidates from the western seaboard produced a more diverse socio-economic mix within the teaching profession. In addition, up to 1970, there were reserved places for males and females in the Training Colleges meaning there were *de facto* gender quotas in place. With the abolition of these reserved places in 1970, the gender imbalance within the teaching profession has steadily worsened. The DES has always shied away from the re-introduction of gender quotas as a means of addressing this gender imbalance. It should be pointed out, however, that reserved places remain an intrinsic part of the selection system for initial teacher education with 10% of College of Education places reserved for *Gaeltacht* or Irish language speaking applicants and a smaller percentage of places reserved for Church of Ireland applicants.

The only discernible official initiative to tackle the gender imbalance within the teaching profession has been the setting up, in 2003, by the Minister for Education of the Primary Education Committee in order to examine this growing gender imbalance and suggest strategies to tackle it. The committee reported in 2004 and one of its key recommendations was a €120,000 publicity campaign called MATE (Men as Teachers and Educators) aimed at encouraging more males to consider teaching as a career. However well-meaning this campaign was, it seemed to fail to take into account that in 2004 while males accounted for 14.29% of 1<sup>st</sup> preference Central Statistics Office (CSO) applications to the Colleges of Education, they made up just 11% of the actual student teacher population in that same year which would suggest that the problem wasn't so much that males were not interested in teaching as a career but that they were more likely to be rejected for entry to the Colleges of Education.

In April 2017, the Minister for Education announced the setting up of a €2.4m scheme aimed at promoting diversity in the teaching profession by attracting more than 120 new teacher entrants (DES, 2017). The scheme aims to target traditionally under-

represented groups such as people from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, students with a disability and members of the Traveller community. Interestingly, the scheme does not include gender although this criterion has been at the heart of virtually all other state sponsored diversity schemes. The school and the world Bryan MacMahon (1991) was writing about is a world removed from today's school. In 1950, it was not uncommon for many pupils to complete their formal schooling on completion of primary school at the age of 12 or 13 years. Just over half a century later, 91% of all pupils now complete their Leaving Certificate with a further 80% of these going on to third level education. What for grandparents was the totality of their formal education is today, for their grandchildren, more a foundation and preparation for their years in secondary and third level education. However, even greater change has come by way of the information and data revolution ushered in by the technological revolution of the last 20 years. Whereas the national school may once have been the local repository of knowledge and information and the teacher its keeper, today most homes have as much access to raw data and knowledge as their local school. It is not just access to knowledge that has changed but the relentless re-definition and re-invention of knowledge itself that schools are now struggling to keep up with.

In recent years, the position of principal has emerged as a key pressure point in the broader educational human resource landscape with the number of applications for the position of school principal falling steadily (IPPN 2006). The system for appointing principals appears to rely more on the vocational sense of duty of teachers to become leaders than on any coherent human resource policy. All the evidence suggests that the administrative workload of running a primary school in the 21st century is now a key determinant in determining the number and calibre of the applicants interested in taking the job. The focus of much of what it means to be a principal now appears to involve managing the expectations and demands of any number of outside agencies as well as being responsible for managing a greatly increased bureaucratic work load. The fact that most of these new initiatives and schemes are routinely under resourced hasn't helped matters and highlights the extent to which an over reliance on a belief in the vocational nature of teaching in the 21st century may not be enough to address the realities of today's school management and leadership.

### **6.3 Empowering research designs**

The fact that the number of males entering teaching is declining and that male teachers within the profession feel isolated due to various forces are not neutral occurrences. They are not natural economic patterns. In order to address the reason why masculinities in Irish primary schools does not count as knowledge requires us to think

'relationally' (Apple, 1996: 24, italics in original). In other words, the lack of interest in men in teaching is the result of cultural, economic and political conflicts, compromises and tensions that organise society. Gender plays an active role in this ideological drama. Official knowledge suggests that efficient, high-calibre teachers should be employed without consideration given to gender. By the same token, Michael Apple urges us to question that forged and sometimes forced consensus and open up the space for a new social and educational imaginary. This requires work on many levels; cultural, economic and historical, and in many sites; policy and practice. Nevertheless, we all have a role to play in producing more research that is in response to the experiences, desires and needs of marginalised groups in education.

## 7. Conclusion

In every age, society has sought to define the function and role of the school in light of the prevailing ideologies of that age. That process has continued into recent history. The age old questions remain today: what is the function and role of the school in society? Is an emerging vision of the 21st century school also adopting a new vision of the teacher? If the school is really being re-positioned on society's cultural and economic spectrum, then perhaps it's time for a serious debate not just on the actual role and vision of the school but on the profile and character of the teachers who will be teaching in these same schools.

In the public realm, the cultural space occupied by the school in the 21st century may be much the same as it was half a century ago. However, such an assumption masks many of the issues relating to the far-reaching changes that impinge on schools today. For all the changes experienced by schools over the last quarter century, there remains a popular desire for the school to remain that of our collective childhood. The notion of the school around the corner being a beacon of stability in a world of change is both comforting and reassuring. However, the work of mapping out the precise cultural space occupied by that same school has only just begun.

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