



# PART I

## Advancing the Conversation

### Male Elementary Preservice Teachers' Gendering of Teaching

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*In this article, we examine how prevailing and alternative conceptions of masculinity framed the ways in which 40 White, male, elementary preservice teachers constructed the meaning of teaching. The imperatives associated with maleness were recognizable through four metaphors frequently used to define teaching and themselves as teachers; to teach is as follows: (a) to be a male role model, (b) to be a sports coach, (c) to appeal to reason, and (d) to prepare oneself for occupations within the field of education that carry more status. These metaphors illustrate which forms of teaching are made possible and which are foreclosed when teaching is constructed through the prism of an hegemonic conception of masculinity. If we expect that increasing the representation of men in kindergarten through sixth-grade teaching will contribute to advancements in the construction of gender-fair schools, then multicultural teacher education needs to help male and female preservice teachers see how they “do gender” in their teaching.*

Multicultural education seeks to understand how the dynamics of gender, along with race and social class, influence one's understanding of teaching and learning.

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This study was partly funded by the Renaissance Group. The authors were the recipients of a fellowship (1996–1997).

Multicultural educators are interested in uncovering the ways in which these dynamics perpetuate gender biases that take a toll in the academic, psychological, physical, and social development of boys and girls (Sadker & Sadker, 2003). Addressing these biases is paramount to the creation of gender-fair schools and classrooms in which stereotypes are challenged and sexism is “seen” and redressed. One of several characteristics of gender-fair schools is a balanced representation of men and women at all levels and roles of the educational field (Sleeter & Grant, 1999). Currently, however, men are an underrepresented group among the ranks of elementary and early childhood teachers. In the United States, 88% of elementary school teachers are women (Sargent, 2001). The majority of the men teaching in elementary schools are clustered in grades 4 through 6, with less than 3% teaching kindergarten through third grade (Allan, 1993). There is, then, a widespread call to increase the representation of male teachers in kindergarten through sixth grade (e.g., Bittner & Cooney, 2001).

What exactly are male teachers expected to contribute to elementary classrooms? This question elicits two contrasting expectations. First, advocates of multicultural education hope that increasing the presence of men in the classrooms will breakdown boundaries which designate certain occupations as suitable for men and others for women, thus disrupting gender stereotyping and segregation (Marshall, Robeson, & Keefe, 1999; Sadker & Sadker, 2003). For others, a call for an increased participation of men is predicated on the historical fear that schools impose on boys a feminine culture (Connell,

1997; Hansot, 1993; Sargent, 2001). Ostensibly, in this culture, boys face difficulties in establishing a masculine identity, a danger presumably exacerbated when the child's father does not live in the child's home. From this second perspective, the presence of male teachers is necessary to reproduce the differentiated gender-role socialization of children. In this article, we examine how 40 male elementary preservice teachers constructed the meaning of teaching and themselves as teachers to uncover to what extent, and how, they may come to meet these alternative expectations.

### **“Doing Gender”**

Both set of expectations are in agreement with gender theory which posits that professional work, like other human activities, involves gendering (Leidner, 1997; Lorber, 1997). As West and Zimmerman (1991) explained, people “do gender” as they engage in “a complex of socially guided perceptual, interactional, and micropolitical activities that cast particular pursuits as expression of masculine and feminine ‘natures’” (p.14). Individuals organize their interactions to express their gender identities and they are predisposed to interpret the behavior of others through gender codes embedded in everyday interactions. In their jobs as teachers, men and women constantly produce and reproduce themselves and others as male or female: the gender of the teacher influences the job of teaching; the job, in turn, has gender characteristics which influence the people who perform it; and, the people with whom teachers work hold them accountable for behaving in gender appropriate ways (Bittner & Cooney, 2001; Sargent, 2001; West & Zimmerman, 1991). In this process of accountability, workers tend to emphasize those job aspects which correspond to their gender identity and reinterpret those traits associated with the opposite gender (Leidner, 1997). What are the normative contents of masculinity and the social expectations to which male elementary teachers are held accountable?

### **The Structure of Masculinities**

The study of gender roles refers to the study of social norms that prescribe and proscribe what people should feel and how they should behave given a constellation of biologically-based characteristics that are socially attributed as correlates of maleness or femaleness. A review of the literature on the structure of the prevailing male-role norms shows a fairly consistent pattern. Thompson and Pleck (1986), summarizing alternative models of masculinity discussed in the literature, concluded that the standards for being a man typically include a proscriptive

norm to stay away from anything feminine in pursuit of achievement status, independence, and self-confidence. Eisler and Blalock (1991) noted that masculinity is commonly associated with deploying competitive and aggressive response strategies as well as with difficulties in the expression of affection, warmth, sympathy, and tenderness, which are essential to the development of caring relationships. According to Good, Borst, and Wallace (1994), men tend to be socialized toward “independence and achievement (instrumentality), avoidance of characteristics associated with femininity and homosexuality (interpersonal dominance), and restriction or suppression of emotional expression (rationality)” (pp. 3–4).

Gender-role characterizations, such as the descriptions of masculinity just provided, are subject to criticism. First, treating masculinity as a unitary concept is problematic; one should speak of masculinities or male standards (Sargent, 2001; Thompson, Pleck, & Ferrera, 1992). Second, gender-role characterizations erase the contradictory meanings of gender found at the intersection of race, sexuality, and class, thus fixing rather than accounting for gender identity (Britzman, 1993; Dugger, 1991). Third, gender is a social process which is historically situated social, operating under perpetual recreation. The norms of womanhood, manhood, motherhood, and fatherhood shift over time (Hondagneu-Sotelo & Messner, 1997). In fact, the men we interviewed often explained their interest in elementary school teaching by resorting to societal shifts in conceptions of masculinity and femininity. These criticisms, notwithstanding, gender expectations, are recognizable aspects of the social order and in the construction of a professional identity (Biklen, 1995; Lorber, 1997).

Juxtaposing hegemonic masculinity against a description of the teaching profession reveals that it is not a career adept to fulfilling normative male-role characterization. In 1853, Horace Mann, the most influential thinker in the development of public schooling, wrote “That woman should be the educator of children I believe to be as much a requirement of nature as that she should be the mother of children” (cited in Hill, 1996, p. 30). This historical quote is also part of the contemporary landscape of the teaching profession. Griffin (1997) asserted that teaching can be aptly characterized by absence of voice, lack of autonomy and control, low status and salary, blurred boundaries between home and school, isolation, and limited opportunities for career advancement.

Studies of male primary teachers have demonstrated how they hold themselves accountable, and are held accountable, for behaving in gender appropriate ways (Bittner & Cooney, 2001; Coulter & McNay, 1993; DeCorse & Vogtle, 1997; Marshall, Robeson, & Keefe, 1999; Martin & Luth, 2000; Montecinos & Nielsen, 1997; Sargent, 2001). In a study of 35 male primary teachers, Sargent (2001) found that teaching at the elementary level was reported to be a mine field of

gendered expectations. For example, men—but not women—were expected to provide technology support, to lift and move heavy equipment when necessary, to handle difficult children more forcefully and therefore to be better disciplinarians, and, to be comfortable being the spokesperson to authoritarian male administrators. They also reported having to work hard to be recognized for aptitudes in areas not stereotypically designated as male such as art or literature. In addition, they reported that they got the message that providing emotional support to children or colleagues was “exclusively within the purview of women” (p. 115). Murray’s (1996) study of men working in child care settings showed how they were cast, and cast themselves, in the role of the father and they quickly moved up the occupational hierarchy. Men who join the ranks of elementary teaching find that gendered rules place restrictions in their access to children and face strong pressures to conform to hegemonic masculinity (Coulter & McNay, 1993; Murray, 1996). These studies and gender theory suggest that the entry of male teachers into the elementary classrooms might do more for reproducing normative conceptions of masculinity and femininity than for disrupting traditional gender roles. In this study, we explored this by analyzing how male preservice teachers used gender discourses to define teaching and themselves as teachers. To what extent will they emphasize those aspects of the profession that are in greater agreement with male-role expectations and diminish or even devalue those that pose a threat to their gender identities? Will they reinforce gender stratification in education rather than question it? More generally, what forms of teaching are made possible and which are foreclosed when they are embedded in a dominant or alternative ideology of masculinity? In what follows, we answer these questions through an analysis of interview data collected from 40 White preservice teachers.

### Method

Individual, hour-long, in-depth, semistructured interviews were conducted with 40 male students who were enrolled in the elementary teacher preparation program of a midsized university in the Midwest. At this institution, teacher education is partitioned into three phases plus student teaching. Ten students (mean age of 21) were completing the course “Exploring Teaching” (Phase I), a field experience taken prior to officially declaring a teaching major. Ten students (mean age of 24.5) were completing the course “Teacher as a Change Agent” (Phase II), the second field experience in the elementary teaching program. Ten students (mean age of 22.3) were completing their elementary methods semester, which falls immediately prior to student teaching (Phase III). The final group

of 10 students (mean age of 23.4) included men in their student teaching semester or men who had completed their student teaching just prior to their participation in the study. All of the participants identified themselves as White and volunteered to participate in the study after a research assistant contacted them by phone.

Each interview was audiotaped and transcribed. Transcriptions were read and coded by each author to identify responses that reflected the use of gender discourses. The presentation of our findings is organized in two parts. First, we describe how a new discourse on maleness is used to make teaching young children compatible with male gender identity. Next, we illustrate how the imperatives of traditional conceptions of masculinity articulate participants’ definitions of the profession.

### Findings

“Doing gender” does not require that we think about it, thus, sexism is elusive and many teachers miss it (Lorber, 1997; Sadker & Sadker, 2003). Not surprisingly then, the male preservice teachers interviewed unwittingly participated in gender discourses as they constructed their identities as teachers. In claiming their place in this profession, our participants tended to recognize that traditional normative gender-role expectations constructed elementary teaching as an occupation for women, questioning with ambivalence and contradictions the legitimacy of that traditional view. Their efforts to question this view were, in turn, questioned by their coworkers’ and families’ exercises in gender accountability.

#### “Guys can be just as nurturing and caring” (participant SW, Phase III)

Teaching has been characterized by an ethic of care, which is, presumably, part and parcel of how females negotiate their professional identities (Griffin, 1997). Teaching is further coupled with social conceptions of femininity as it draws on discourses that connect women to the nurture of small children and helping (Biklen, 1995; Griffin, 1997). In claiming their place in elementary teaching, these men questioned prevailing ideas that linked femininity, caring, and teaching. In doing so, they drew from new cultural images of fatherhood. The “new man,” according to Hondagneu-Sotelo and Messner (1997), is a “White, college-educated professional who is a highly involved and nurturant father, ‘in touch with’ and expressive of his feelings, and egalitarian in his dealings with women” (p. 58):

A man can provide more strength of discipline, a little more of a masculine approach to things. Women are technically

passive by trait, men are looked at as the stronger as far as leadership. It's really shifting away from that because women are getting stronger too. The men are being portrayed more now as the sensitive man. It's starting to even out. (participant EF, Phase III)

I went through twelve years of school where 90% of my teachers were female. So I just have this vision in my mind of a female teacher . . . I'm not sure why that is. Maybe people picture females as being more nurturing and caring and that's what people view teacher as being. Guys can be just as nurturing and caring. (SW, Phase III)

It's not even teaching as in giving kids more and more knowledge. It's more of being there for them, being someone that they can rely on each day and know that there's one person in their life who's going to give them some structure and guidance in their life. (participant RC, Phase II)

Adopting this new cultural image of manhood came with warnings and resistance from coworkers and family members:

The women always looked to me, because I was one of the only guy counselors. They'd go, "this kid is acting up, will you do something?" Because I was the guy they said that they'd listen to me. I think it's all about approach, the way the individual teacher feels. (participant CW, Phase III)

I threw out the comment to my mom that I might enjoy teaching kindergarten. One of her first remarks was that in Iowa, it's rarely seen. People might have some problems with that. They might wonder what was wrong with me . . . She was just pointing out the way the rest of society looks at it. Society has changed even in this amount of time. (RC, Phase I)

Sargent (2001) found that the cloud of suspicion surrounding men who work with children elicited the strongest response from the 35 male primary teachers he interviewed. One man put it the following way: "Women's laps are places of love. Men's are places of danger" (p. 49). These men also reported that districts' policies and guidelines regarding physical contact between children and adults were enforced differently for men than for women. As preservice teachers, our participants already knew that they would have to exercise greater restrictions in their emotional expressions compared to their female coworkers. Unlike Sargent's sample of primary teachers, this greater degree of restriction was not problematized by the preservice teachers we interviewed. After all, it contained their own proclivities for traditional male "distance":

... females can get away with hugging students, where males have to stay at a distance. Females can show more emotion and society doesn't look down on them because you don't hear of many females abusing children. [this is

not a problem] I've never really been a huggy type person anyhow. I wasn't raised that way. (participant JK, Phase III)

### **Casting Teaching in the Light of Traditional Conceptions of Masculinity**

In the preceding analysis, we illustrated how these men understood the intrusion of a new gender discourse which affords them a place in the care and nurturing of children. Next, we illustrate how they expressed this care in ways congruent with societal expectations for masculinity. Repeatedly, they defined teaching through four specific metaphors for teaching; to teach is as follows: (a) be a male role model, (b) be a sports coach, (c) appeal to reason, and (d) prepare yourself to move into occupations with higher status and financial rewards.

**Teaching as male role modeling.** Participants had heard and answered the call to join the elementary teaching force to provide children with male role models. When asked to define teaching, they more insistently applied an ethic of care to the subset of children whose fathers were absent from their lives:

I think the students need that, they need males in the classroom . . . Some of them don't have dads at home . . . I've been told by teachers that they need males, to show them the way and be a good role model. I think a lot of guys are starting to see that they can come into the classroom and teach and not just coach. (participant JO, Phase IV)

[We need more elementary male teachers] maybe because the divorce rate is so high. There's a lack of male role models especially for children in inner city schools. If the parents are divorced, most of them live with their mother, so there's a lack of a role model of a man. (participant ML, Phase III)

**Teaching as coaching.** Messner (1997) noted that boys, to a lesser or greater extent, are judged according to their ability, or lack of ability, in competitive sports. Goffman (1977, cited in West & Zimmerman, 1991) pointed out that organized sports give men an opportunity to express, and be applauded for, their endurance, strength, and competitive spirit. Interviewees did not emphasize the competitive aspects of sports as much as the possibilities that their involvement in sports opened up to them for bonding with children and molding the character of their students. For 19 of these 40 students, it was their interest in coaching that propelled them to seek an elementary teaching major. In fact, 14 students already held a coaching position and five expressed a strong interest in getting a coaching certificate. When asked to imagine themselves as teachers, we often heard the following response:

An image of students being able to come talk to me and tell me if they're having problems and being open to that. A caring coach. I'm very enthusiastic, I have a lot of energy. (RC, Phase I)

**Teaching as an appeal to rationality.** Norms of masculinity centered on independence and rationality led participants to subdivide the world of elementary education by rejecting the idea of teaching in the lower elementary grades. Of the 40 students interviewed, only six (15%) expressed an interest in teaching kindergarten through second grade (K-2). Some devalued K-2 teaching:

I've had quite a bit experience [working with children]. I've been working with 5th and 6th graders, but not much at the lower elementary levels. I did my participation week at the elementary level and I didn't have any problems, but it was more of a babysitting job than a teaching job. You can't even relax getting them to line up for a drink, you can't reason with them—that was my big problem. I enjoyed it, but I couldn't do it. (participant MR, Phase III)

I think a lower elementary education teacher has to be more patient because those children have more trouble listening and they don't always understand what they've done wrong or what they need to do . . . . In upper elementary, you need the patience, but the kids are able to think more logically and figure out more things for themselves. (participant AS, Phase I)

Not all participants, however, placed children's independence at a high priority. One student, who had just completed student teaching, explained why he wanted to teach in the lower elementary grades:

K-3 is what I want to teach. I've taught K-12. I'm more comfortable teaching elementary. I can give more attention to them. In high school you're there just to make sure they stay in order. In elementary you need to guide them and show them the way and help them. I'm willing to give more care to them; high school kids don't really want the care, they just want to get it done . . . . The bond is so much easier to form with the younger kids. As you get to 4th, 5th, 6th grades, they're more independent. I respect them for that, but I'm more wanting to help them gain that independence . . . . (participant JB, completed student teaching)

**Teaching as a doorway into occupations with more status and financial reward.** Previous research has shown that men who entered the child care field quickly jumped onto the glass escalator as they advanced rapidly into positions within the organization that carry more pay and power (Williams, 1992). The findings of this study showed that most men entered teacher education with the expectation of riding this escalator. In agreement with prior research, the majority of the participants did not envision themselves as classroom teachers throughout their professional careers (Montecinos & Nielsen, 1997).

They anticipated moving out of the classroom to take administrative positions, college teaching, or other leadership roles within the profession. Only 9 (23%) of the 40 students interviewed indicated that they expected to remain classroom teachers throughout their careers. The rationale offered for this choice went along with what this student said:

Obviously I want to get a teaching position . . . . In time, I would want to get back for my masters in educational administration. I would love to be a principal some day. Either a principal or an athletic director. I see both jobs as being prestigious and I would really enjoy them. (participant RB, Phase IV)

Among the few who wanted to remain in the classroom, we heard comments such as the following:

I want to continue to be an elementary teacher. I've seen what a principal or superintendent does. I'm not into the business part of it. I'm there for teaching the kids and that's what I want to do. I don't want to watch other people teach kids. I can't imagine doing anything else but teaching the kids. I'm so dedicated to them and want to teach them something new and learn with them. (participant MW, completed student teaching)

In summary, in agreement with gender theory, as these men claimed a space in an occupation that in the United States has been traditionally associated with femininity, they reinterpreted those traits associated with the opposite gender and emphasized aspects which corresponded to their gender identity. First, they claimed that men, as women, could be nurturing and caring. To show this ethic of caring, most made choices that corresponded to social expectations for male-appropriate behavior: emphasizing the rational aspect of teaching, even devaluing its affective component, and seeking to bond with children through sports. Second, most partitioned the profession along gender lines by clustering in upper elementary teaching and projecting their long-term professional aspirations as administrators who would place them in a position to oversee those working directly with children. It is noteworthy to point out that those men interested in lower elementary teaching were also those uninterested in coaching and in leaving the classrooms for administrative positions.

## Discussion

The widespread call to increase the number of men in elementary classrooms is based on a perceived need to provide children with male role models. Although some advocates emphasize the reproductive possibilities of these models for gender differentiation, others empha-

size the possibilities that these models offer for a disruption of prevailing norms for gender differentiation that result in gender stratification. Our conclusion, drawn from a sample of White, middle class, preservice male teachers, is that recruiting more men into elementary teaching will more likely reinforce rather than disrupt gender stereotypes in the educational field. As predicted by gender theory, “in doing” gender, men will cooperate with their female counterparts to recruit boys and girls to “be” (have) according to normative definitions of gender, instead of encouraging them to rewrite gender norms that restrict their development.

We, of course, believe that men need to be represented in the elementary teaching force but also advance the understanding that their mere presence is not enough to advance the creation of gender-fair classrooms. We concur with other authors who have noted that schools of education need to provide future educators with the training and experiences that can enable them to create a gender-fair, multicultural, education system (Sadker & Sadker, 2003; Scott & McCollum, 1993). In their study of seven male elementary teachers in Canada, Coulter and McNay (1993) showed that when men are aware of how the institution and the people who work in it push them to reified stereotypes, they have more tools to draw from to resist the practice of becoming what others want them to be (have). As those authors noted, in performing as a man to bond with boys, the teacher can question whether he is to “draw on the bond to work actively *against* the negative aspects of male group behavior, and turn the relationship to good use through a consciously anti-sexist pedagogy” (italics in the original, pp. 409–410).

The findings of this study raise questions about calls to increase the presence of men in the elementary teaching workforce to provide children with male “role models.” The White men we interviewed were very willing to assume that task, without questioning exactly what was worth modeling and to whom that would be worthy. Given that the imperatives associated with maleness resonated loudly and clearly in their constructions of teaching, as well as in how coworkers understood their participation in teaching, it seems to us that the presence of these men in the elementary schools will secure the dominance of the traditional division of labor for raising children. A gender-integrated elementary teaching force will tend to mimic the domestic roles of fathers and mothers (Sargent, 2001; Williams, 1992).

As these men sought to become role models and make a difference in the lives of children who have an absent father, they were driven by a deficient view of the home life of children of the inner city and children of poverty. We heard in their comments the observations of Hondagneu-Sotelo and Messner (1997), who noted that the gender displays of the “new man” might be best seen

as strategies to reconstruct hegemonic masculinity by projecting onto men from subordinated groups negative characteristics. These future teachers did not appear to question power arrangements that make it more likely that fathers from subordinated groups will be unable to fully participate in the lives of their children. When the institutional exclusion of men of color and low-income men is ignored, children from marginalized groups are often taught to obediently insert themselves into the existing social order, without raising questions about power arrangements that made them more likely to be fatherless. In their rather missionary commitment to helping children, participants did not seem to pause to think about the extent to which their lives could be imitated by those who were growing up under very difficult, and at times very different, circumstances from their bucolic and idealized memories of childhood in the rural Midwest. We think that to make a difference, our participants need to rethink the possibilities of fashioning identities by copying the exemplary as idealized identities (Britzman, 1993). They need help in probing their taken-for-granted belief that when children from subordinated groups get enough exposure to middle class Whiteness, they will be able to erase the difficult circumstances of poverty and racism they encounter in their lives and its impact on their schooling.

When students of teaching are asked to write their educational autobiographies and articulate personal teaching metaphors (Bullough & Gitlin, 1995), they can also be asked to examine how these are embedded in gender discourses. When gender is made to be a central category for analyzing social life, then students can recognize gender as conventions, norms, and values which cloak themselves as expressions of individual choice. It is only after gender is denaturalized and its normative elements questioned that men and women can examine and choose from the range of social relations that can be construed in the name of teaching. By creating an awareness of gender discourses, multicultural teacher education can better prepare male teachers for the stresses they might face as they must carefully manage their masculinity in an occupation that is built on the assumption that workers will draw from discourses of femininity. As this study showed, teaching young children offers enough flexibility to accommodate stereotypic gender performances by men, but this carries contradictions and conflicts worth exploring in the process of becoming a teacher.

Asking men to join the profession so they can reconstruct rather than reproduce gender stratification requires that multicultural teacher education assists them in reflecting on how scripts of masculinity bound their performances as teachers. The gender segregation in teaching (and gender stratification in the wider society) takes on multiple layers. When men choose to enter elementary teaching, they peel back only one of these layers. Peeling the next layers would involve increasing the number of

men who wish to teach in the lower elementary and pre-school grades, along with increasing the number of men who want to remain in the classrooms throughout their careers. Given that the process of gender accountability implicates men and women, we suggest that multicultural teacher education assist both in this process of rewriting the scripts for masculinity which, as this study has illustrated, constrained men's choices in teaching as well as perpetuated gender segregation in the profession.

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