I have worked in an elementary school classroom for four years. It is quite lonely being one of only two men in the entire school. I feel like an outsider looking in on a female dominated environment. Sure, my female colleagues encourage me and offer support, but I still feel somewhat excluded. When I was in elementary school, I only had two male teachers. Should I have listened to some of my male colleagues during my teacher education and decided instead to teach high school? At times, I wonder how other teachers perceive me. How do parents and students perceive me? Often, I find myself asking these questions. In the end, I return to my belief that students benefit from having a male teacher as a role model in their early years of education.

Evidence shows that there is a major shortage of male teachers in elementary school classrooms. In A Few Good Men, Kathleen Vail (1999) refers to a 1999 study for the National Center for Education Statistics that found that more than 90% of elementary school teachers are female in the United States. I am employed by the Vancouver School Board, so Vancouver statistics are especially relevant to me, and this project. Statistics published in the Vancouver School Board Employment Equity Council Newsletter (2001), reveal that only 331 of 2166 or 15% of permanent elementary school teachers in Vancouver are male. Jim Allan (1993) refers to the significant gender disproportion that exists within the elementary grades in Male elementary teachers: Experiences and perspectives. He states that “within the K-6 grade sector, most men teach in upper elementary classrooms, or work across grades in art, music, or physical education...Large elementary schools with only one male classroom teacher are not unusual” (113).

The purpose of this research project is to explore the experiences of male teachers in elementary schools. This paper is concerned with promoting the need for male elementary teachers, not criticizing female teachers. Historically, elementary school teaching has been dominated by female teachers. I believe that the lack of male elementary teachers is a major problem and a detriment to the education of young children because young boys and girls are not exposed to male role models and teachers.

Attracting males into the female dominated environment of elementary education will not be a simple task. Inaccurate stereotypes of what elementary education is about continue to impede the recruitment process. However, to teach for social justice is to teach for a “heightened social consciousness, a wide awakeness that might make injustice unendurable” (Greene, 1999: xxx). That means having males in the position of elementary school teachers to generate a “sense of agency in young people...so that they can feel themselves engaged with those around” (xxx). These young people, and specifically more boys, may then choose to become teachers themselves.
There has been a great deal written about gender roles and their implications for elementary education. Many of my male colleagues and the participants in my research project were already aware of much of this research and the issues raised within it as they deal with it everyday in schools. Jesse Goodman and Tom Kelly (1988) write about the feminization of elementary education in Out of the mainstream: Confronting the male profeminist elementary school teacher, and spend some time looking at the patriarchal system in place for female teachers and how it has had an impact on the feminization of teaching.

Women have faced years of oppression in all economic, cultural, social, and psychological relationships with males. Historically, women were disadvantaged in the workplace and were paid lower wages than men in the same jobs. Female occupations were accorded less respect and prestige in comparison with male occupations. In Across the great divide: The entry of men into women’s jobs, Harriet Bradley (1993) reinforces this notion by suggesting that the impact of industrialization on the sex-typing of work resulted in the dominance of men in traditional, highly skilled professions such as law and medicine, and the relegation of women to lower paying semi-professions such as nursing, clerical work, and school teaching. These careers became dominated by women or “feminized,” but were still controlled by men further up the hierarchy working in administrative positions. Goodman and Kelly state that although the rationale for:

…increasing the number of women within teaching often made reference to women’s moral superiority, patience, and nurturing qualities, there was also the belief that women needed to be controlled…Underneath the rhetoric of women as the natural and superior guardians of children was an unspoken belief that these young women could not be trusted in the same way as male teachers of early days. (3)

Perceptions of elementary education as women’s work were linked to assumptions of this work as an extension of motherhood. Meanwhile, men still maintained control and power over education as school administrators or as teachers of in academic areas accorded higher prestige. More specifically, men taught specialized subjects in secondary education. Any male who wished to cross over into feminized teaching jobs encountered several obstacles. First, there was the lack of any financial incentive for men to enter these lower paying professions. Second, issues surrounding damaged masculinities entered into the mix when men worked in professions stereotyped as being “women’s work.” Bradley (1993) refers to the importance of having men who enter into female-dominated professions, including elementary education, work towards developing “new masculinities that may encourage men to overturn stereotypes…thus laying stress on the active role of men themselves in making choices and changing the patterns of segregation” (25).

Many different perspectives on what elementary education is and how it should be carried out are shaped by stereotypes. James King’s Uncommon caring: Learning from men who teach young children refers to one of these by stating that there are perceptions held by the public that “men who teach primary grades are…principals in training” (1998: 3). The perception is that men who are teaching in elementary classrooms do not stay there long, and instead move up the ladder to higher prestige, better paying administrative positions (Vail, 1999).

Jim Allan (1993) conducted in-depth interviews with fifteen male elementary teachers working in Iowa, examining the impact of gender on teaching in a profession dominated by women. He felt that these male elementary teachers, because they had chosen to enter elementary education, were constantly under the scrutiny of others when it came to issues relating to their maleness or masculinity. On one hand, they had to display attributes of masculinity and model actions of a “real man” in a manner that was acceptable in the elementary classroom. However, they also felt the “pressure to conform to stereotypically feminine qualities to establish the sensitive, caring relationships necessary to effectively teach children. For these men, gender is highly problematized, and they must negotiate the meaning of masculinity every day” (114).

This raises other important questions: What are the characteristics that a “real man” should display as a classroom teacher, and to what degree
should these so-called “masculine” attributes be displayed? Should male teachers coach athletics? Gain a reputation as a disciplinarian? Raise their voices every time they get upset? These are stereotypical expectations for the characteristics and behaviours of male teachers. But these behaviours and characteristics are also displayed by some female teachers. In *The paucity of male elementary school teachers: Discriminatory hiring practices and other contributing factors*, Zeringo and Baldwin-LeClair (2001) suggest that children often do not mention teaching as a career option for men. Furthermore, Zeringo and Baldwin-LeClair believe that within elementary schools, male teachers face prejudice from female colleagues and administrators, which can may create a hostile or uncomfortable work environment.

Caring is often closely linked to teaching in elementary schools. Caring is most often attributed to females, and justice and individualism are often attributed to males. King (1998) states that very few males choose to teach primary grades because of “culturally constructed factors such as attitudes about caring, gender-coded behaviour, and sexual orientations” (3). This could suggest that if males lack this caring and nurturing trait, they cannot be successful primary teachers. The assumption is that caring and nurturing are learned behaviours for men, and that women engage in caring and nurturing behaviours naturally. Consequently, there can be a perception that the best primary teachers are female, and the concept of men as primary teachers engenders negative reactions from peers and society in general.

**Investigating the Topic**

I chose to explore the experiences, choices, and feelings of male elementary teachers in one-on-one structured interviews. In February 2002, I conducted five interviews with male elementary teachers working within the Vancouver School District. In the results that follow, pseudonyms are used to maintain teacher confidentiality. The five male teachers ranged in age from twenty-nine to forty-six, with years of teaching experience ranging from three to fifteen years. They had various backgrounds in music, physical education, special education, coaching, and acting. Four of the teachers taught primary, and one had taught intermediate grades exclusively. I recruited some of the participating teachers by approaching male teachers I knew in elementary schools throughout the Vancouver School District, while others heard about the project through friends and expressed an interest in being interviewed.

I asked them about their background in education, why they chose to pursue elementary education as a career, and their future aspirations. In terms of their experiences as teachers, participants commented on their relationships with fellow colleagues, and any difficulties or problems they may have encountered which relate to being a male teacher in an elementary school. Finally, they were asked to express their opinions about why there is such a major gender imbalance within the ranks of elementary school teachers and whether or not this is a problem that needs to be addressed and rectified.

Perspectives and opinions about education, relationships, and teaching experiences are all individual. Each participant had a different background and set of circumstances that led him to choose elementary school teaching as a career. Consequently, each interview I conducted was
unique. Despite this, several common themes reoccurred during the interviews, and the discussion that follows focuses on analyzing these themes.

Major Themes

The five interviews brought forth some significant education related issues that I have come across in my own teaching career. The major themes that I would like to look at more closely are: teacher relationships with fellow colleagues, issues related to physical contact with children, the sexual orientation of male elementary teachers, and the significance of gender differences among teachers as possible explanations for the under-representation of males in elementary classrooms.

Relationships with colleagues

In terms of relationships with their colleagues, the teachers I interviewed gave a wide variety of responses. Some saw these relationships as being very positive, others found them somewhat problematic. For the most part, male teachers got along well with their female colleagues and mentioned positive aspects of their interactions with them. Many female teachers were described as being very helpful to their male colleagues, offering advice and help on many occasions.

Dan mentioned several of the positive as well as some negative aspects of his interactions with female colleagues from the perspective of an intermediate teacher:

Dan: I have mixed feelings. There are lots of positives. I get along with female teachers. They provide a different perspective than perhaps what I would provide. They kind of look after me. It’s kind of nice. Many of them appreciate the fact that I am one of the few males on the staff so they make sure they treat me a little nicer, I do the traditional male things for them and they do the traditional female things for me, which is kind of nice. On a sort of negative side though, I find that I cannot be as blunt or abrupt or as truthful in my language as I would be with men. I find that I have to sort of walk a tight rope act on certain issues. To not offend anyone. You don’t want to say something inappropriate, whereas with men you have more of an opportunity to just blurt it out. Women tend to be more verbal about things and I don’t like that. It sucks up my time…these are things you need to be aware of in how you handle yourself.

For the most part, the teachers I interviewed understood that gender differences do exist between males and females. As examples, it was suggested that females were typically caring, nurturing, patient, and paid close attention to detail, while males possessed attributes of aggression, independence, and physical strength. Essentially, mutual levels of respect exist among male and female teachers. It is understood that females have different strengths from males.

However, there were times when some males felt somewhat excluded from conversations or felt they were being marginalized. As the minority on almost all elementary teaching staffs, male teachers need to adjust or be conscious of the differences between male and female personalities. Doug makes some interesting comments in his interview when asked about his feelings of working in a female dominated environment:

Doug: Great. I get along with women fine. I don’t feel excluded. Sometimes the conversations in the coffee room might make me feel excluded but generally they’re okay. I think that women have different strengths than men. And I think that some people…can try and escape the influence of their stereotypical attributes. What I’m getting at is women are often assumed to be nurturing while men are often assumed to be competitive. Males are assumed to be more violent. Women are usually assumed to be careful of all the little details…children having all their coats done up, shoes are tied, and all these little details which make for good teachers. And I think those perceptions are what keeps there from being so few male teachers.

Jason: How do you feel about being a male elementary teacher employed in a profession dominated by women?

Doug: Great. I get along with women fine. I don’t feel excluded. Sometimes the conversations in the coffee room might make me feel excluded but generally they’re okay. I think that women have different strengths than men. And I think that some people…can try and escape the influence of their stereotypical attributes. What I’m getting at is women are often assumed to be nurturing while men are often assumed to be competitive. Males are assumed to be more violent. Women are usually assumed to be careful of all the little details…children having all their coats done up, shoes are tied, and all these little details which make for good teachers. And I think those perceptions are what keeps there from being so few male teachers.

Jason: It sounds like you’ve had a pretty positive experience in the schools you’ve been at as a teacher.
Doug: I must admit that...I remember when I came to this school there were some teachers who were saying that last year the teacher had children doing things in a certain way. And they aren’t doing things in that same way this year. I feel that certain pressure to perform to the way things were done with the female teacher. And the class was apparently very quiet, very orderly.

Could these expectations and pressures be attributed primarily to gender differences among males and females? Male teachers working in elementary schools may share some of the same feelings in terms of being pressured to adapt or perform different tasks from a female perspective.

It is important to note that some teachers I interviewed spoke specifically of their experiences working with male colleagues as well. Not surprisingly, these were also positive and negative. George spoke about a difficult situation he encountered with a male colleague:

George: Like most elementary schools, the higher grades have more males and the lower grades have more females. That’s a tradition going way back…Women teaching the younger grades, still the second mother sort of situation. I’ve always related to the intermediate teachers because you are doing the “guy thing” as well as coaching. I have really only had one instance where, as a kindergarten teacher or as someone who enjoyed primary a lot, I had to butt heads with an intermediate teacher because he didn’t think I was a guy enough, or something along those lines, to be coaching. He said, “Aren’t you the kindergarten teacher….I don’t know. These boys could walk all over you. He is old school, he didn’t know me, and we didn’t relate well, and we still don’t.”

It is important to note that age gaps among teachers, differences in grades being taught, and varying interests in personal lives are all things to consider, in addition to gender differences, as possible contributing factors that impact the relationships of teachers with each other.

Physical contact with students

A second theme that most of the teachers I interviewed spoke about brought together issues related to physical contact with children. As male teachers, they talked about some of the difficulties and awkward situations male teachers are faced with when working with young children. They include being alone with children, young children asking for hugs, and any sort of physical contact with children in general. The teachers I interviewed put a great deal of thought into their responses on such issues.

Based on my own experiences as a male elementary teacher, the awareness of physical contact and issues related to it are constantly on my mind. I assume that the issue is equally significant for the men I interviewed. I also found it interesting to listen to comparisons made with female colleagues, for whom physical contact with children and issues related to touching are not nearly as scrutinized.

George: It helps to clarify some of the awkward moments, especially as a male primary teacher that you have to be conscious of, is touch. I constantly have kids asking for hugs. You try and stay away from that but I have a girl who when she is having a good day will ask,
“Can I have a hug?” I’ll try to stall her, or push her away because my instinct will say “yes you can” but I also know how that can be viewed…I give her a high five instead. I try to set up some very clear and definite boundaries and it bothers me because…I do think affection is a part of especially a nurturing part of growing up.

Jason: …I follow the same sort of rules in my class. …

George: and you have to be conscious of it. Especially with young children… Female teachers on the other hand are hugging away. …

Male teachers spoke of the discomfort they felt at being alone with young children or being placed in situations where there may be physical contact. They also spoke of the ways in which they avoided such situations or set up boundaries to prevent potentially awkward or troublesome instances from arising. When interviewing Doug, he stated:

Doug: I think sometimes little children will quite innocently run up and hug me. I want to be ready for a hug. Otherwise it could look a little embarrassing… I often wonder, what does this look like? So I just like to be ready. I’m very conscious of that because touching and children in the elementary is something that a lot of people really look at closely. One has to be very careful…. What complicates matters further, is that in several of the interviews, male teachers believe that showing affection for some young children through some sort of physical contact is an important characteristic of being a caring and nurturing teacher. Kevin mentioned needs that many of the students in his school have that could benefit from some degree of physical contact from the teacher:

Kevin: …I see a lot of female teachers hug kids and give them that physical contact. I think it was my first week here I ran to my principal and asked what to do…I just heard about all these horror stories about kids going home and saying something to the parents. And things getting taken out of context. So for a while I would never be alone with any kids. I would be so worried. I talked to my principal and another male Grade 1 teacher and especially in an inner city school, these kids really need that physical contact… If I’m going to fly away and say leave me alone, it’s probably not going to be the best thing for these kids. Yet, I know that I don’t give a hug the way a lot of other teachers do. In this school, kids know that I really like giving high fives. I don’t get into why I don’t give hugs to kids…. It’s sad because I do see kids who are down and sad… who could sometimes use a little physical comfort. I’ll do it more so when I’m around a bunch of people… as a male teacher, I don’t want to put myself in an awkward situation. Ultimately, male teachers need to be especially conscious and aware of all their actions related to physical contact with children so that nobody misconceives or interprets a situation in a potentially damaging manner. Male teachers have to play a bit of a balancing act with the degree to which they are comfortable with any sort of physical contact and the benefits that specific children can obtain from such contact.

Sexual orientation

A third theme that was brought up by some teachers I interviewed focused on issues related to the sexual orientation of male elementary teachers. The stereotype that male elementary teachers are gay appeared to be directed mainly towards male primary teachers. Is it because primary education is an area dominated by females, which would mean that men who are teaching primary are feminine or non-masculine, and therefore homosexual? From what I understand, none of the five participants I interviewed are homosexual, but some had some interesting things to say about having been stereotyped as gay and about what the implications of this were. George referred to one situation in particular:

George: Most guys that I deal with who are teaching, when they find out I’m teaching kindergarten raise an eyebrow… I had one particular person that saw that if I was a male in kindergarten, that basically he was implying that I was gay and that I wouldn’t be able to be aggressive at all or strong or whatever the stereotypes are of homosexuals.

Kevin, who had initially entered education with the goal of teaching high
school, was largely unaware of the perception that male elementary teachers are gay until he entered into the primary program:

Kevin: One common philosophy or mindset is that men who go into primary are homosexual. The reason that I may have a problem with this has nothing to do with a homosexual teacher. It’s just that it’s not who I am. I don’t want someone to think of me in a way that I’m not. It’s not that I want to be labeled as gay. Just don’t label me as something that I’m not. It’s funny that when I come across primary teachers who are guys, I don’t even think about that. I’m not gay, so I don’t want people to think I am….

Doug offered a different perspective in his interview when responding to the notion that male elementary teachers were homosexual:

Doug: That’s interesting. Because in fact from my experience, there is a lot of homosexual male teachers. That’s nothing wrong. I think they are very nurturing individuals…People have a preconception that a homosexual male is going to make a bad teacher. Just as a person has a preconception that a male teacher is training to be an administrator. All these things are stereotypes.

Overall, it could be suggested that such a stereotype prevents male teachers from entering primary classrooms; instead, they chose to teach intermediate grades or to work in high schools. Consequently, the status quo remains, as female teachers continue to dominate primary classrooms, and young children do not get to benefit from having male teachers as role models.

Gender differences

Finally, I would like to make reference to gender differences among teachers and their significance as a possible explanation for the gender under-representation of teachers in elementary schools. In several interviews, male teachers emphasized the importance of showing affection for young children, especially those in primary grades.

They felt that caring and nurturing was an important part of teaching. However, several of them referred to this aspect of teaching as a trait that women do naturally, while men have to learn it. There was the belief that primary teaching is an extension of motherhood. Robert reinforces this idea by making reference to his family situation:

Robert: I gave it more thought… but I still think men need women to do the nurturing…I have a twenty month old son and my wife makes twice as much money as I do and she is working half time to stay at home with the son….Right from the very beginning…the child wants the mother. It’s a role she takes on from the very beginning whether she wants to or not. Even at school, who are the ones who pick up the kids everyday? Nine times out of ten it is the women.

Closely related to the notion that teaching young children is about caring, is the ability to show patience. Patience is a virtue that all elementary teachers must possess, regardless of the grades they teach. Some suggested that female teachers have a much higher level of patience with young children than male teachers. Male thresholds for being patient may also be put to the test much sooner, as suggested by George:

George: I don’t know about primary. Different things happen. Especially this year, it’s been a really difficult class for me. When my patience level is pushed, my stress level rises very high and my patience is about this short and I’ve butted heads with a lot of the boys and some of the stronger girls. Behaviourally, they reacted that way… I’m wondering if being a male in primary, if the way I deal with things, is a little different and how the kids react to it….My friend, she said to me…”I know why this student is behaviourally having problems. Because she is acting out and trying to get a rise out
of you and you’re so laid back that it bugs her and she is determined
to get you….

The last gender related issue I want to touch on is the different views of
discipline and how male and female teachers are associated with those
views. The teachers I interviewed had different ideas about how discipline
should be and is carried out in elementary classrooms by male and female
teachers. On one end of the spectrum, teachers suggested that there is a
perception that males make better disciplinarians and that they should
work with students with behaviour problems, especially male students.
Could it possibly be that these students were in need of a male role model?
Dan spoke about this very issue in his experiences as a male teacher:

Dan: …This is a quote from an administrator and other females as
well, “This student needs to be with you because you’re a guy.” Well,
that’s unfair, because he needs a male role model, and that’s why he
needs to be with you.” Often that child is going to be a difficult child,
and I have a problem with that.

On the other hand, some teachers felt that their female colleagues did
better jobs of keeping control of their classes and were therefore better at
dealing with issues related to discipline and solving problems. Some of
these male teachers felt that the students in their classes were noisier, and
more free spirited. Kevin stated that:

Kevin: …I also know that I’m being very conscious of not being
completely nurturing and like the way a typical female might be.
Well, you are going to come across people who are not that
tolerant…it may sound harsh, but not everyone is going to….

Jason: …solve problems for you.

Kevin: …or give you that hug. Maybe it’s just because we are
guys….I typically see more females with more patience or a higher
tolerance.

Possibly because they were males, they choose to not deal with certain
discipline issues or shift the responsibility back toward the student. In
comparison, a female teacher may intervene much sooner.

Prescriptions for Change

I want to conclude by offering prescriptions
for change and why I believe they are
important. Not surprisingly, barriers that
have kept males out of elementary
classrooms still exist today. Consequently,
the number of males teaching in elementary
schools remains extremely low. Children
stand to benefit from having male teachers in
their elementary years of school. Male
teachers offer different perspectives about
education from those of female teachers.
Many children do not get exposed to the
alternative perspectives of education that
experience learning with both male and
female teachers would allow until they reach
the upper intermediate grades or high school.

Both boys and girls stand to benefit from exposure to a broad range of
teaching methods and the ways in which they are encouraged to learn. All
teachers have different teaching styles, regardless of gender. However, it
is important for children in their elementary years to be exposed to a
variety of teaching styles from both male and female teachers. Having a
greater gender balance of teachers in elementary schools would perhaps
encourage more males to consider a career as elementary teachers.

Universities have a responsibility to promote and recruit male teachers
into their elementary education programs with the goal of having more
male teachers in the position of role models for young children. Hopefully,
as in a domino effect, this would encourage more males to follow suit. By
seeing more male teachers in elementary schools, boys will realize that
choosing a career in elementary education is respectable and venerated.
Although I think we need to strive for more gender balance in elementary
Barriers that in the past may have prevented males from entering into elementary education must be addressed. Attracting more males into elementary education may take many years, but it is a worthwhile process as all children stand to benefit from being exposed to both male and female teachers as role models in their elementary education years.

Post-Script

I reflect on my research project one year later and see much of the same. I remain isolated as the only male on my school staff. Parents of the students I am teaching this year are intrigued by the fact that their child is being taught by a male. Their reactions have been very positive. However, one instance has arisen that stands out in my mind. A parent requested that their child be transferred into a female teacher’s classroom. The parent did not agree with my approach to disciplining inappropriate behaviour. My belief is that she thought I was not nurturing or caring enough; that I was being insensitive to her child by raising my voice when I deemed it was necessary; and that her child was being singled out for inappropriate behaviour. In her mind, my behaviour must have had something to do with me being a male. I wonder if a female teacher would have reacted any differently than the ways that I have.

I am troubled by the ongoing gender misrepresentation of elementary teachers. Barriers and stereotypes of teachers that have prevented males from entering into elementary education have not been addressed. My plan, wherever I teach, is to stress the importance of providing children with both male and female teachers. My hope is that all of my students, male and female, will obtain a heightened social consciousness, and feel empowered to become teachers one day if they so desire.

Being a researcher, and interviewing and analyzing the words of colleagues, has helped me grow both as a teacher and as an individual. I take a great deal of comfort in knowing that there are others who see the importance of children having male teachers in elementary schools, and I am inspired to continue down the path of elementary education in whatever directions it takes me.

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About the Author

Jason Eng has been an elementary school teacher for four years. His experiences include teaching ESL and primary grades in the Vancouver School District. He is currently completing a Masters degree in Education at the University of British Columbia, and aspires to teach all elementary grades, and work in school administration. Jason recently moved to an inner city school where there are five male enrolling teachers, four of whom are teaching in primary classrooms.

Photo credit: Sean Cook and Tamara Cameron