

# WHY MEN CHOOSE TO BECOME PRIMARY TEACHERS

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## Abstract

This paper presents a critical analysis of literature relating to why males choose to become primary school teachers. Discussion within the paper concentrates on identifying and exploring connections between what is currently known about being a male primary school teacher and what motivates these men as they both pursue and practice within the profession. This paper reflects the preliminary investigations of a broader doctoral project that will examine the recruitment and retention of male primary teachers within Tasmania. Countries such as Australia, New Zealand and the United Kingdom have experienced calls for increased male recruitment to and retention in the primary teaching profession. Current research into the male primary school teacher experience offers strong arguments for the need to recruit and retain more men into primary teaching as well as many attempting to explain the reasons for low numbers of male classroom primary teachers. Interestingly, studies investigating the motivations of those men who choose to teach young children are far less common. The critical review of relevant literature allows for deeper understanding of present perceptions of the male primary school teacher and teaching experience to be established. In doing so, the paper emphasises exploration of the motivations of men who choose to be male primary school teachers, and proposes that it is within the exploration of male's attitudes towards and motivations to being a male primary school teacher that will elicit rich insight into how strategies currently utilised for the recruitment and retention of male primary teachers can be improved.

## Key words

Motivations, Male Classroom Primary Teacher

## Context

The current research literature into and around male primary school teacher recruitment and retention offers a range of varied arguments for why we need to attract and keep more males into the primary teaching area (Livingstone, 2003) as well as offering many reasons for the low and declining numbers of male classroom primary teachers (Cushman, 2007; Smith, 2004). Much of the literature exploring the male primary teacher situation and experience is quick to point out that many males are either choosing to leave the profession or are simply not attracted to it in the first place (Cushman, 2007). In contrast, studies investigating the motivations of those men who choose to teach young children are far less common; rather, much of the writing tends to focus on why men are *not* drawn to the profession, rather than why they *are*, or how they could be. These men who chose to pursue a career in teaching regardless of the barriers and challenges raised in much of the literature need to be given more opportunities to explain their motivations for doing so.

This paper draws together a comprehensive review of what is currently known about why males choose to become primary school teachers. In doing so, the researcher elicits the key points of prevalent examples of research into the area of male primary school teacher experience, recruitment and retention. A synthesis of the review findings are critically examined to determine where emphasis is placed when examining why males become primary school teachers; either on the barriers or negative challenges that act as a deterrent or the motivations and positive challenges that draw them to pursue primary school teaching as a career.

The researcher's own experiences and reflections of working as a physical education specialist in several primary schools with varying numbers of male staff in both classroom teaching and other roles

prompted this research. The researcher, being male and having taught from a physical education perspective in primary schools, personally faced some of the challenges outlined in much of the literature reviewed for this paper, such as isolation associated with being the lone male teacher on a school staff, and expectations to assume masculine roles (Cushman, 2007). Given the researcher's own experiences as a male teacher of physical education in primary schools, he was interested to explore whether male primary classroom teachers faced similar or different challenges, but also to examine whether their motivations for pursuing primary teaching as a career might reveal insights into how they overcome potential barriers or challenges.

Insights into what prevalent examples of literature reveal about the role motivations play in relation to male primary classroom teacher's approaches to overcoming challenges and barriers are a central focus in this paper. The insights obtained from this critical review of literature were then used to inform and guide the focus and framework of the researcher's doctoral investigation.

## **Methods and techniques**

To guarantee that a sufficient depth and breadth of opinion were included in this analysis, the literature under examination has been drawn from both national and international academic perspectives in the form of refereed journal articles and other edited academic texts. These texts reflect the data utilised in this investigation, and form the foundation of analytic discussion presented in this paper.

The data collection and analysis techniques utilised for the critical comparative analysis involved a process of data reduction, display and conclusion drawing and verification (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Wellington, 2000). This process involved identifying of themes and patterns, the coding of these and then a comparative analysis (Wellington, 2000) of the themes identified as being within and across the literature under review. The researcher was also aware of noting any contrasts as well as commonalities across examples of literature, as it was this within these that lay the potential to "establish and elucidate equivalency between two (seemingly disparate) things" (Hornbarger, 2009, p. 183). This process then allowed for 'the how and why' of particular outcomes, perceptions and situations to be established (Polkinghorne, 1995; Suldana, 2009).

The following discussion explores the common themes identified across the literature, with critical discussion offering further insight into why males choose to become primary school teachers. The critical review of common themes allowed the researcher to consider where emphasis was distributed across research examples examining why males became primary school teachers. This paper was sensitive to identifying any propensity towards either positively or negatively framed research, specifically in the deliberation of barriers or negative challenges that act as deterrents to males or the motivations and positive challenges that draw males to pursue primary school teaching as a career.

## **Discussion and analysis of literature**

In this next section, a discussion of thematic insights obtained from the critical comparative analysis of pertinent literature unfolds. The discussion is broken into two distinct stages; the first elucidates the various ways that motivation manifested within and across examples of the research under review. The second stage of the discussion moves further into exploring how the research under review recognised and disseminated the perceived advantages of being a male primary school teacher.

### **Motivations**

The exploration of the motivations of those men who, despite the numerous challenges they face, still choose to become primary teachers, are vital to the improved recruitment and retention of men in the profession. Numerous studies have noted that the major motivating factor for males choosing teaching is, like their female colleagues, a desire to work with children and make a difference in their lives (Cushman, 2005a; Johnston, McKeown, & McEwen, 1999; Mulholland & Hansen, 2003). Other

reasons cited in literature included the opportunity to be a role model, contributing to society, and to assist with providing children with a good balanced education (Skeat, 2004; Stroud, Smith, Ealy, & Hurst, 2000).

Bernard, Hill, Falter, & Wilson (2004) reported that a significant majority of the male participants in their study stated that they could remember one or more male teachers who had made important differences in their lives, often because the male student could relate better to his male teacher than his female teacher. Similarly, Stroud et al., (2000) noted the most important factor for students choosing education as a career was the influence of a positive role model or mentor at school during their time as a student. Numerous participants in their study stated that they knew they wanted to be a teacher before they had finished school because of their positive interactions with this mentor. These findings point to the strong and long lasting influence of high quality male teachers as positive role models for their male students. If more quality male applicants can be recruited and retained into the primary teaching profession, these results suggest that more of their students will also be motivated to join the profession and become positive role models for a new generation of students.

Mulholland and Hansen (2003) noted that for most of their final year male Bachelor of Education participants, the experience of working with children in their families, as sports coaches or during work experience, as well as the perceptions of parents and peers that they were good with children, had motivated them to become teachers. These male student teachers wanted to make a difference in children's lives and were found to be motivated to continue with their degree by their positive experiences on school-based placement. These findings were supported by Stroud et al., (2000) who also noted the importance of strong family support and the value of interacting with young children to encourage and reinforce their choice of profession. While these two studies combined only represent the views of 44 men, their findings show that the targeting of men from large immediate or extended families should be seriously considered by education faculties looking to increase their male student numbers.

While Mulholland and Hansen (2003) found that over half of the participants in their Australian study entered their teaching course directly from school, Farquhar (1999) states that those men who choose primary teaching as a profession are most likely those who have already tried another occupation or have fathering experience. These findings are supported by those of Skeat (2004) who stated that men who have life and or fathering experience tend to be more intrinsically motivated to enter teaching, and consequently remain in the profession longer than those who enter teaching primarily because they were unable to find work in a more traditional male area. Whilst this suggestion requires more investigation, Farquhar's two motivations were investigated in relevant literature to determine if they were prevalent in the findings of other research.

### *Teaching as a second career*

Males choosing teaching as a second career has been reported in North America, where increasing numbers of men are leaving business careers to take up teaching (De Corse and Vogtle, 1997). Skeat (2004) speculated that these older men are less susceptible to the peer pressure encouraging males to enter 'masculine' careers. McNay believes these men are tired of "running the rat race" (2001, p. 143) and instead want to 'do something worthwhile', 'make a difference', or 'serve society'. Stroud et al., (2000) similarly found that many men had exchanged high salaries for the personal satisfaction they hoped to achieve through teaching. They noted that regarded the change as "an opportunity for challenge and adventure" (p. 53) and were highly motivated for their students to succeed.

Cushman (2005b) found similar results in New Zealand with some participants even stating they had made this decision deliberately because they recognised they needed more maturity before embarking on a demanding career such as teaching. This concurs with the suggestion of De Corse and Vogtle (1997) who believe that the more mature outlooks of older men may have contributed to them developing more of an interest in serving society and personal satisfaction rather than high salaries. The comments of many of the teachers in Cushman's study point to them being drawn into teaching

by the 'moral service' aspect of the profession and that rewards this service brought were contributing to their high job satisfaction. If this indeed the case, the targeting of those men who are more 'intrinsically' motivated to become teachers because they want to 'make a difference' needs to become a strong driver of recruitment campaigns.

### *Fathers as teachers*

Jones' (2006) investigation into the experiences of female primary teachers identified the 'right kind' of male primary teacher to be a man who displays both traditional masculinity and the more feminine behaviours of sensitivity and caring. Jones' participants believed that these men should be men of action who are also comfortable with their emotions. They concluded that these men were likely to be fathers. These findings support those of Moyles and Cavendish (2001) who concluded that fathers were better able to teach young children, than male teachers without their own children. White (2011) interviewed teachers who were fathers and discovered they viewed the two roles as complementary. Her participants felt that being a father had great benefits for them as teachers. Their interviews showed that these men believed they had a better understanding of children and were viewed as "more real" by their students as a result of being a father. They also spoke of having an increased empathy for parents because they could understand "how it felt to be a parent concerned about their child's learning and progress" (p. 177).

Although White's (2011) findings should be viewed with caution due to the small sample size, they do concur with those of larger studies done by De Corse and Vogtle (1997) and Francis et al., (2008). These studies noted that teachers who reflected on their students' individual backgrounds resulted in them having a greater understanding of the individual needs of their students. This resulted in them being able to use this understanding to structure their teaching to better meet those needs. Despite neither of these studies being specific to teachers who were parents, their findings relate closely to the fathers in White's study who felt their awareness of their students' families and backgrounds increased as they reflected on their own.

The fact that the teachers who were fathers were generally older was also identified as an important factor by both Skeat (2004), and Moyles and Cavendish. These older men were believed to be less affected by some of the factors identified in research as discouraging young men from pursuing a career in primary teaching. Smith (2004), Cushman (2007) and numerous others have identified these factors as including the low status of teachers, low salaries and issues surrounding physical contact with students. Smith has made no comment on whether the men in her study were fathers, and while these factors are prevalent throughout literature, their continual presence in research findings may in fact be perpetuating the low numbers of males joining the profession by keeping them constantly in the public spotlight. Much more emphasis needs to be placed on why men do choose to teach, in the hope that these reasons will become more widely known and motivate men with similar beliefs and values to consider primary teaching. The fact that male primary teachers may no longer fear being perceived as 'homosexuals' or 'paedophiles' if they are fathers has been seriously overlooked in current relevant literature. If this is indeed the case the targeting of fathers who will be less affected by the major challenges caused by uncertainty surrounding physical contact, is another recruitment strategy that should be strongly considered in order to improve male recruitment and retention into the primary teaching profession.

### **Advantages of being a male primary school teacher**

In light of considering the motivations for why males chose to pursue a career in primary classroom teaching, this review of literature now turns its attention to the perceived and implied advantages of being a male primary school teacher as evidenced in the literature under review. A theme that emerged was the perception from males that their gender would be in various ways advantageous to their securing a position of employment. Despite much of the literatures' propensity to focus negatively upon barriers to being a male primary school teacher, Allan (1993) states that being a male primary

teacher has both disadvantages and advantages. These advantages are often overlooked and it would appear that this reflects a lack of understanding as they are not as largely well conceptualised and articulated as the disadvantages. Smith (2004) suggests that the lack of literature surrounding these advantages may be because it could be deemed controversial to highlight them in the face of societal opinions tending towards minority groups always being disadvantaged.

Smith (2004) noted that whilst categorising male primary teachers' experiences as disadvantageous or advantageous is an effective literature management technique, it is difficult in reality as many experiences are more neutral than anything else. It would appear that misconception around perceived advantages for male teachers are at times being interpreted as negative due to their ambiguity. If what Smith (2004) states is true, that within what may initially appear as a negative, for example 'positive discrimination', then perhaps greater clarity towards how these advantages are 'labelled, packaged and sold' would serve to better communicate them as advantageous. This is demonstrative of how advantages to being a male primary classroom teacher could be perceived as vague and hidden within disadvantages, and vice versa. It would appear that perceptions towards the understanding of the male primary classroom teaching experience is at times fraught with contradictions, and this may reflect a deeper complexity of the issue. Allan states that males' explanations of their primary teaching experiences are a 'social landscape filled with contradictions, in which each advantage, based on gender, carries with it potential disadvantages' (1993, p. 2).

According to Smith (2004), there are four main advantages of being a male in the primary teaching profession, these being positive discrimination in gaining employment, positive discrimination in gaining employment, being mentored, noticed and appreciated. Through the course of identifying themes of commonality across the spread of literature reviewed, these four advantages were determined to be of significance in other examples of relevant literature and consequently reflect the overarching themes of the next four sections of critical discussion.

### *Positive discrimination in gaining employment*

Smith (2004) and Cushman (2007) have both noted that there is some evidence within literature alluding to male primary teachers receiving positive discrimination in gaining employment because primary schools want more male teachers. De Corse and Vogtle (1997) state that "as long as demand exceeds supply, men are guaranteed to be more marketable and therefore to have an 'in' for getting jobs before qualified females" (p.41). Allan's (1993) research suggested that men were preferred above women because of the desire of male principals for male companionship and support; and the public's demand for male role models in the classroom.

Further evidence was found in Cushman's (2006) study of principals in New Zealand, in which 35% of principals stated that if all things were equal between a male and female candidate, they would 'possibly' or 'definitely' employ the male candidate. Interestingly, slightly more female principals (37%) than male principals (33%) made up these numbers. A small number of principals stated that the need for more males in schools "warranted the compromise of employment practices in males' favour" (p. 47), and confirmed that parent and community pressure to provide boys with male role models would contribute to their decision making. Lichtenberg and Luban (1998, as cited in Cushman, 2006) suggested that attributes such as being a role model for students may be a further advantage to male candidates as they can count as a 'plus factor' and add to what they can offer the school in addition to their teaching; therefore making them more appealing to employers.

Broadley and Broadley (2004) observed primary school principals in New Zealand who appeared to favour candidates who had similar beliefs and values to themselves. Cushman (2006) notes that the sex similarity attraction paradigm suggests that interviewers regard candidates of the same sex as more similar to them and therefore treat them more favourably. With many school principals being male, this paradigm may go some way in explaining why more male job candidates are successful. Graves and Powell (1995) also noted interviewers who favoured candidates that they perceived as being more similar to themselves; however they observed that "female recruiters saw male applicants as more

similar to themselves than female applicants” (p. 94). Although this highly simplistic theory needs to be subjected to more rigorous exploration; these results appear to show that male candidates can be advantaged by interviewers of both genders.

While 35% of principals in Cushman’s (2006) study stated they may favour male candidates; they indicated that this would only happen when a male candidate and female candidate were seen as equal. Cushman noted “that those principals most in favour of a gender balance were no more likely than other groups to favour male applicants suggests that adherence to a policy to employ ‘the best person for the job’ outweighs a desire for gender balance” (p. 47). Cushman (2006) concluded that even though principals believed a gender balance was important, their focus was on high quality teachers. They wanted to employ the best applicant regardless of gender to ensure that this focus was maintained. One principal commented “Staff are appointed for their ability, passion and suitability for the job; not their gender” (p. 46). The majority of principals in Cushman’s (2006) study expressed a commitment to employing the ‘best person for the job’. This finding may go some way to eliminating the belief that male applicants are given positive discrimination in gaining employment.

Although the qualified male teachers in her study did not mention any advantages, the male pre-service teachers that Smith (2004) interviewed acknowledged they had heard anecdotal evidence that males were more likely to get jobs and hoped that this was correct. Interestingly, Cushman (2005b) encountered male teachers who ‘hated the feeling’ they had got their jobs primarily because of their gender rather than their professional achievements or work ethic, and were constantly fighting for respect as a teacher from their female colleagues. Some literature reveals that a perception of being in an advantaged position could lead to some men having unrealistic expectations; “They were even more surprised to find they were among the last to be hired. Expecting to benefit from their privileged status as men, and to be snapped up by school boards, they were frustrated and resentful when it did not happen” (Coulter & McNay, 1993, p. 400).

### *Positive discrimination in gaining promotion*

Carrington (2002) notes that one of the results of the societal perception that primary teaching is ‘women’s work’ is the trend of males being promoted more rapidly than females. Cushman (2007) states that there is significant evidence that men progress faster from beginning teacher to school principal, and also that male primary teachers can look forward to positive discrimination in gaining promotion. Williams (1992) termed this trend the ‘glass escalator’ effect and believes it is a significant contributor to the widespread over representation of men in senior positions within the field of education in many Western countries.

Skelton (2002) reported that in the United Kingdom, one in four male primary teachers is likely to become a school principal, compared with one in 13 female primary teachers. While she could not find any comparable national data for Australia, Smith (2004) obtained from the New South Wales, Victorian, Western Australian and South Australian education departments in 2002 showed that 60.22% of primary school principals in those states were male, compared to just 20.87% of primary school staff in Australia being male. The more recent ‘Staff in Australia’s schools 2007’ report by the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace relations noted that the proportion of male teachers in all primary schools was approximately 21% in 2007 whilst the proportion of males in positions of leadership in primary schools was 43% (Commonwealth of Australia, 2008). Whilst the latest of these three studies indicate the number of male primary school principals is in decline, all point towards an over representation of men in leadership positions.

Bradley (2000) believes that society prefers males to progress to senior positions of authority and respect rather than ‘wasting’ themselves in the classroom. The principals interviewed by Jones (2008) were aware of “being propelled into leadership positions by groups within society” (p. 695) while Burn (2002) encountered a male who felt that he did not have control over his promotional path and said that men are pushed into senior positions “because they are men” (p. 5). Cushman (2005a) states that many male teachers aspire to senior roles as they offer more responsibility and a greater salary;

therefore being more appropriate for men. Being promoted quickly into senior positions can be seen by some men as compensation for their 'questionable career choice' (p. 323). Both Thornton and Bricheno (2000) noted that the female teachers in their study emphasised this advantage a lot more than their male counterparts. Only one male noted that gender may be an issue in promotion, but believed that a higher percentage of males were promoted simply because there were less of them.

The obvious consequence of this 'glass elevator effect' is the fact that it further reduces the already low number of male primary classroom teachers. Lewis, Butcher and Donnan (1999) point to one of the negatives of this effect being that it can also result in a limited career path for men who want to teach rather than progress into managerial roles. Mills, Haase and Charlton (2008) note that men who want to be primary school classroom teachers and do not aspire to leadership roles can risk having their motives and sexuality questioned. In light of this research, it is not hard to understand the motivation of those men who do aspire to be principals. Mills, Martino and Lingard (2004) state that while the 'glass escalator' effect has compensated for some of the issues men face in primary teaching, it has proved to not be enough of an incentive to attract significant numbers of men into the profession. In light of this finding, it may be time to focus on actively recruiting those 'intrinsically' motivated men who "enter primary teaching do it because they want to, not because they can get quick promotion (Carrington, 2002, p. 296).

### *Being mentored, noticed and appreciated*

Haase (2010) includes "greater recognition than women for contributing to the important social role of educating young children" (p. 174) as one of the 'privileges' male primary teachers can experience. Allan (1993) notes that male primary teachers developed strong relationships with their male principals who actively mentor them and rely on them as allies whose support they can rely on. While isolation is often presented as a disadvantage of being a male primary teacher, men may find that they are more noticed and valued because of their minority status. Several of the men observed by Coulter and McNay had "received complimentary notes and comments from parents, most of which made some reference to their being male" (1993, p. 410).

Mills et al., (2008) have more recently observed that while male teachers may identify themselves as valuable, they may also feel that they are under constant scrutiny from suspicious eyes. This is another example of an 'advantage' that many male teachers may argue should actually be categorised as another disadvantage. West (2004) claims "it is clear that expectations of beginning male teachers are different from those of beginning females" (p. 12). Mills et al., reported on a first year male primary teacher who left the profession after only one year because of the extra expectations placed on him as a male teacher. These included committing to after school sport, and being deliberately allocated a class of 'behaviourally challenging' students. They concluded that being prized comes at a price; and this price is often greater expectations which can be very challenging for some males to live up to. This could be considered an example of what Smith considers to be a disadvantage within an advantage, and can be exacerbated in schools in which male teachers do not have a male principal or other male colleagues to rely on for support.

### *Developing specialisations*

Smith (2004) notes that male primary teachers develop specialisations as a way of distinguishing themselves from their female colleagues and also appearing more masculine. These specialisations typically involve taking responsibility for more prestigious 'masculine' areas such as sport and information technology, and also teaching upper primary classes. Smith's findings are supported by very similar results in a study by Thornton and Bricheno (2000) in the United Kingdom. Interestingly, West (2004) argues that in feminised primary school environments, men often "feel pushed into the masculinised world of sport" (p. 12).

While parents and students may think of these as popular and prestigious roles, Cushman (2010) notes that not all male primary teachers share that opinion. Some of the male teachers in her study were



reluctant to take on sports leadership roles in their schools but had eventually 'accepted' that it was expected of them as males as that they had little choice. Cushman noted that most males accepted these roles; however for those isolated in a school with no other males, this extra load could be viewed as another disadvantage within what is often perceived as an advantage.

## Conclusion

This paper has presented a critical analysis of prevalent literature relating to why males choose to become primary school teachers. The discussion within the paper has elucidated the commonalities and contentions inherent within the literature in an attempt to illuminate connections between what is currently known about being a male primary school teacher and what motivates these men as they both pursue and practice within the profession. An important step in further refining current strategies to recruiting and retaining males within the primary classroom teaching profession is ascertaining clarity around what is already known and what needs now needs to be addressed further. Until the reasons why current male primary teachers have chosen to enter the profession have been identified, this critical review of literature suggests that the recruitment of more men is unlikely to be successful.

While current research contains many varied arguments for recruiting and retaining more men into primary teaching as well as many reasons for the low numbers of male classroom primary teachers; further studies aiming to understand the motivations of those men who do choose to teach young children is what is needed, and it is this specific insight that will guide the shape and direction of the researcher's doctoral investigation. In light of numerous countries such as Australia, New Zealand and the United Kingdom experiencing calls for increased male recruitment to and retention in the primary teaching profession, it is proposed that further and more rigorous investigation into the specific reasons why current male teachers have chosen to join the profession will be of benefit. Simply stating that we need more males in the profession does not mean they will be compelled to respond.

Skelton (2009) believes that future recruitment drives should focus on what current teachers and prospective teachers have in common. In light of this, the researcher's doctoral investigation will attempt to identify the qualities and characteristics of successful male primary teachers within the Tasmanian context. It is proposed that this exploration of male's attitudes towards and motivations to being a successful and quality male primary school teacher that rich insight can be elicited into how strategies currently utilised for the recruitment and retention of male primary teachers can be further refined and improved.

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