Male Primary Teachers as Role-Models: But I Thought I Was 'Just' Teaching Them to Read and Write!

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Introduction

Coming to the end of my first semester of graduate level studies, I have had to quickly face a number of new realities in my research ideals: 1) I have needed to adapt and transform the way I believe research is conducted, and 2) the previous way that I have conducted research is only one of a number of different methods and approaches. This was a surprising revelation for me, as I had never given a real amount of consideration to all the different forms that research can take.

Thinking about this single-minded view surrounding research has not mirrored the approach that I have taken as a classroom teacher, however. Working in a socio-economically diverse catchment with a number of families and community members that face significant barriers to success and comfort daily, whether financially, legally, socially, or in their viewpoints when thinking about institutionalized education, I have had to clearly recognize that there is no panacea for success, and there is absolutely no 'one size fits all' approach, in education or otherwise. As such, my own approaches to education, as well as the larger world around me, have had to adapt and change while utilizing different ideas and techniques.

My own journey throughout education has been a tumultuous one. Always seen as "capable" by my own teachers growing up, as well as other adults in my life, I lost count of how many times "if you just would apply yourself, and stop being so defensive…" was uttered either indirectly in my direction or straight to my face. This dramatically affected my perspective around my own education, and it was very difficult to be told that I was "wrong," simply due to the fact that I learned differently than my own educators expected or wanted in some cases.

This disparity between my own learning style, and my subsequent approach to new knowledge(s), compared to my teachers led me to a number of viewpoints that I have formed surrounding educational research, as well as I how approach students in my own professional practice. As I've grown older, I've become increasingly rooted in pragmatism, in both research and my own teaching, I've learned to "hold no allegiance to a particular set of rules or theories…" and "value utility and what works in context…" (Leavy, 2017, p. 14) More specifically, much like during my own practice as a grade five classroom teacher for the last eight years, I've come to the realization that no single approach to learning, or research for that matter has seemed appropriate to me in every situation.

This pragmatic outlook has dramatically impacted the way that I've started to think about my future research, as well as the actual topic(s) that I want to investigate. Through my ten years overall working in elementary education, I've recognized the disparity in the number of male teachers versus the number of elementary educators in total. Even more so, the number of practicing male elementary school teachers with a focus on the importance of social-emotional learning, as well as the goal of instilling self-regulation strategies and techniques in their students is an overwhelming minority.

These observations have led me to the recognition of the impact, or occasional lack thereof, that male educators can have on the learning environments around them. As a result, I have developed a greater appreciation of the dramatic effect that men in schools have on students, and particularly those in elementary and primary schools in low income, inner-city neighborhoods where student populations and their families may face significant barriers to academic learning and healthy social development.

This effect of skilled, socially responsible male educators is subsequently the direction that I wish to focus my own intended research. At this point in my own educational journey, and the development of my research, my professional observations have led me to two research questions that I want to investigate:

1) Do male educators in elementary/ primary schools have a responsibility, or obligation, to be 'role models' in their respective positions?
And;

2) Can we quantify the influence that male educators have on the students that they work with daily?

Literature Review

To provide background for these research questions, as well as attempting to contextualize the challenges and unique opportunities that are present for male educators, the attached literature will discuss three major themes: fatherhood and parental responsibility in education, employment opportunities in education for men, and the gendered stereotypes of masculinity and heteronormativity in early education.

Fatherhood and Parental Responsibility in Education

While not solely an issue isolated to men working in education, the role of 'parental responsibility' in classrooms is dramatically changing. As such, the social requirements, and particularly those required of male teachers, are increasingly becoming a point of emphasis in professional practice. The work by Ed Brockenbrough "You Ain't My Daddy," (2012) provides an effective look at the challenges faced by male teachers, and specifically black male teachers, as they navigate the intricacies of being seen as role models in an urban, predominantly black school district located in upstate

New York, just outside of Syracuse. Unique as an example of Community-Based Participatory Research, it clearly highlights a number of challenges faced by African American educators.

Similarly, the involvement of fathers, and male caregivers, in pre-kindergarten programs is something that needs to be investigated further. According to McBride et al. (2001) in "Intervening with Teachers to Encourage Father/Male Involvement in Early Childhood Programs," there is a definitive link between fathers, and other positive male influences and the long-term social success of children in their elementary years. Through qualitative interviews and informal feedback, McBride paints a clear picture of the importance of male involvement in early childhood development.

The work by Schell and Courtney (1979) predates most of the other scholarly work in this piece surrounding the importance of male educators but provides a developed outlook on what was deemed important at the time in the lives of grade-six students without a father-figure: academic achievement. While the article does not consider ideas like social-emotional learning, it does give a starting point when investigating the importance of male leadership for elementary students.

The "Status of Mere Man," (1912) edited by A.E. Winship gives a look into the viewpoints of many men involved in academia at the time. While wholly outdated, this piece of literature serves as a look back to supposed gender roles, where men's responsibility was in no way connected to child-rearing or elementary education. Rather, it was more linked to political aspirations, governance, and law. As antiquated as it may be, it provides insight into where many pre-conceived ideas of masculine identity and gender stereotypes originated from.

Employment Opportunities for Men in Education

   Challenges surrounding the apparent declining numbers of male teachers have been the focus of a significant amount of literature as well. First, Ian Davis and Stephen Hay from the Queensland University of Technology provide an in-depth analysis of pre-existing literature surrounding the significant shortage of male teachers in Australia, with a focus predominantly on primary teachers. Within their study, they make significant references to Skelton and Mancus, both of which are viewed as important contributors to the field of gender studies and gender stereotyping within the education system in Australia.

   Addressing many of the issues brought forward by Davis and Hay, *Men and the Classroom: Gender Imbalances in Teaching* (2005) by Drudy et al. provides a well-developed, sequential approach to a number of challenges that men specifically face in the classroom, as well as posing the question "How do we get more men into teaching?" Touching on a wide variety of feminist influences within the education profession, this work delves into widespread beliefs and misconceptions of the roles of men in the classroom and elsewhere. Drawing from research from a variety of institutions within Ireland, *Men and the Classroom* provides an extremely insightful, well-rounded in-depth investigation into the 'why' of men not entering education on a larger scale.

   Through a trio of articles, K.F. McGrath et al. investigate "The Plight of the Male Teacher" (2020) and highlight the importance of male primary educators not only for boys, but for girls as well. Based off the results of qualitative group interviews and quantitative surveys with sixth-grade students and their parents, it represents a strong desire for more male primary educators. Subsequently, the works conclude that the

presence of male teachers being present in younger grades is not only beneficial to boys, but to girls too.

Stereotypes of Masculinity and Heteronormativity in Early Education

Finally, a third theme that arises in the literature supporting this work surrounds the roles of 'traditional' masculinity and normativity in male educators' life experiences. Research conducted by Simon Brownhill from the University of Cambridge poses the question "Should male teachers aspire to be 'role models?' or merely facilitate the relationships between students and those who *should* be their role models?" In its steps to define masculine responsibility in education, it departs from a substantial portion of literature on the topic and provides a differing viewpoint on whether male teachers should aspire to be a significant positive influence in the lives of primary aged boys. Formed around a series of qualitative interviews with certified teachers and teacher-trainees, it provides a unique outlook on the role and influence of male teachers.

Seen as an important contributor to the research surrounding sex and gender-role stereotypes in education, Mancus (1992) highlights through a number of quantitative questionnaires with elementary-aged students, the importance of having male teachers present. Published in 1992, her work served as a significant starting point for many pieces of literature in the years to come.

Much like Mancus' work, the article written by Joanne McDowell delves into the impact of gendered expectations that men arguably face when entering the education profession. Highlighting the 'double bind' surrounding masculine norms and heteronormativity, McDowell interviews both men and women working in the education field in the United Kingdom. Through qualitatively focused sessions, she highlights and

elaborates upon the pressures that many men find within education, often resulting in them leaving the profession.

Titled suggestively, "Real Men or Real Teachers? Contradictions in the Lives of Elementary Teachers" (2020) by Paul Sargent, highlights a number of public perceptions that many male educators face on a daily basis. Arguing that men are under closer scrutiny surrounding their contact with young children, Sargent's work concentrates on ethnographic and focus-group interviews to look into the lived experiences of male teachers, and shows the precautionary and compensatory measures that many take when interacting with students, and in doing so illuminates another significant reason why men are often hesitant to go into the primary education field.

Similarly, Christine Skelton (2003) explores several views of professional masculinity and how it relates to the identity of self for many male (and female) teachers and trainees. She argues that male teachers may not necessarily be needed to provide positive male role modelling but agrees that there needs to be more men working in education. Providing results from a number of questionnaires to both male and female teachers, she showed the tendency of male teachers to work with older students, directly connecting to the self-imposed heteronormative masculine ideals of many teachers and trainees.

Research Methods

At this point in the development of my own inquiry and what I hope to glean from them, I feel that the most appropriate research method for me to utilize will be that of a Mixed-Methods Research (MMR) approach. I believe that combining the qualities of

Qualitative and Quantitative research approaches will best benefit the goals that I wish to accomplish. Hoping to remain pragmatic in both the way I view my own practice, as well as I how I approach my intended research, I look forward to utilizing facets of both methods within MMR.

As I have noted in previous works, taking an MMR approach will allow me to use my own proximity to potential research participants in what I believe will be the most effect way possible. Hoping to conduct research within the school district that I am employed, Abbotsford, I already have several positive contacts with senior administration at the district level and will be able to point to precedents of other employees who have previously conducted graduate and doctoral level research within local school populations. Additionally, I have made previous note of my loose definitions surrounding the terms 'positive role-model,' as well as 'academic success,' and while it was my original intention to create definitions for these terms on my own before embarking on my investigative inquiry, I believe that it will be far more effective to define these more clearly through a collaborative effort.

Specifically, my intention is to collaboratively define these terms alongside the intended research participants within my work. To do this, I will need to be acutely aware of my own personal influence with participants. However, as I have become increasingly more cognizant of "how power comes to bear," (Leavy, 2017, p. 47) I feel that I will be able to come to an effective, and appropriate, approach to creating widespread conclusive definitions of the two terms.

Unlike previously written iterations of my research plans, it is now my intention to enact a three-step research process. Composed of two different quantitative

questionnaires, paired with individual and focus-group interviews, I believe I will be able to obtain a significant level of data which will be more than adequate to effectively answer my two proposed research questions. The first step in the research process will work towards defining 'positive role-models' and 'academic success.' Through anonymous, quantitative questionnaires utilizing a five-point Likert scale, my intention is to focus on the families of grade-three and grade-six students that are in schools with high numbers of male classroom teachers, as well as male administrators. By being able to inject family and community voices into these definitions, I believe it will provide a more significant insight into the perceptions of 'success' and male educators, and in doing so provide a much more valuable baseline.

Next, both individual in-depth focused interviews of the students, as well as their parents will be proposed. The overriding rationale to this will be to provide an authentic perception of male educators through both questioning, as well as participant-led informal stories and feedback. By recognizing the challenges that may be presented by only interviewing elementary-aged children, I hope to compile a more comprehensive overview, and collect more developed insights of both students, as well as their families, and show how male educators have positively affected their time in elementary school, as well as their lives overall potentially.

Finally, after conducting questionnaires to develop the concepts of 'positive role-models' and 'academic success,' paired with qualitative interviews of both students and their respective families, my underlying intention is to extend this pre-existing research into a simplified longitudinal study. By utilizing standardized learning assessments at the both the provincial and district level, (Foundational Skills Assessments from the BC

Ministry of Education at both the grade four and seven levels, as well as grade three written assessments from the Abbotsford School District, [which will provide further support for the FSA's]) I will be able to effectively track growth and achievements statistically.

Strengths and Limitations

As I have mentioned in previous works, I believe that taking an MMR approach will benefit from the strengths of the qualitative and quantitative approaches, but I will simultaneously have to be cognizant of the respective shortcomings of each. First, the strength of qualitative research is clearly demonstrated by the level of detail and attention given to the individuals that will participate in the interviews. I strongly feel that these will provide detailed insights, as well as clearly demonstrating the individual beliefs and potential pre-existing biases of the research participants. Additionally, due to the possibility of have previously established relationships with a number of the participants, I believe that a very significant level of honest and transparency will be present, and it will allow me to receive intimate accounts from participants that can't be uncovered with any other type of research.

Second, the value of the accompany quantitative analysis is the further reaching scope of the research itself. Its ability to reach larger portions of the student population, and their families, as well as other schools within Abbotsford, will provide a substantial amount of statistical data that will provide the basis for further short and long-term investigation. Additionally, it provides the framework for the intended longitudinal study which I wish to develop and will hopefully demonstrate the long-term ramifications and benefits associated with the involvement of male teachers and educators.

Oppositely, I still feel it's very important to recognize the real limitations of both research approaches within MMR as well. While the strength of qualitative research is its ability to provide in-depth insights of individual participants, it is extremely difficult to provide a large number of individual accounts due to the intensive interaction and the significant amount of time which each interview requires. Additionally, as many of these interviews will be with individuals and families that I have pre-existing relationships with, it will be extremely difficult to completely eliminate all levels of confirmation bias with the information that is provided, due to preconceived ideas surrounding the effectiveness and influence of 'positive male role-models.' As a perceived insider, I will need to be aware of the influence that I potentially carry with participants, and whether or not it could actually affect the honesty, and potential effectiveness, of the answers given by those surveyed.

While the anonymity provided by the quantitative questionnaires may encourage some participants to answer honestly, there is also the potential for this anonymity to create the opposite effect as well. As previously mentioned, a significant strength of the quantitative analysis within the MMR approach that I'm proposing, is the scale that information can be distributed to, but the downside could be the potential for dishonest answers that may not actually add any value to the research being conducted. Subsequently, without direct, in-person interactions, interpretations of answers between myself and participants could potentially result in inaccurate data and results.

Lastly, I believe a final shortcoming of the quantitative component of my intended research is the potential for superficial answers, a lack of understanding and underwhelming explanations of participant answers that could potentially come from

widespread data collection. As such, the full scope of understanding regarding what is intended with the research may not be wholly obvious to the research participants.

Conclusion

Despite these challenges associated with both qualitative and quantitative research methods, I still firmly believe that taking an MMR approach best combines the strengths of the two. As someone who has taken a winding, sometimes indirect, route through education and research, I am excited to see the results of this potential inquiry and look forward to the answers that I may uncover. By remaining pragmatic in my approach to research, I believe that I will be able to successfully investigate my intended research questions and subsequently quantify the influence and value that male educators have in the lives of elementary-aged students.

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