

Teaching and the gender imbalance: do we need more MATES?

INTRODUCTION

The diminishing presence of males within the teaching profession (Education Queensland, 2002a) is attracting significant social and political commentary. Brendan Nelson (2003b) Federal Minister of Education, Science and Training claims “There are some 250 schools in NSW alone which have been reported as not having a single male teacher”.

In response to the decline, authorities have proposed a number of remedial responses including the formation of male teacher strategies, male only pre-service teacher training scholarships, wage rises and mentoring programs.

Education Queensland (2002b) has set a bold and ambitious 35% target for male teacher employment by January 2006. This is a significant increase on the 27.3% current proportion of men teaching within Queensland’s public schools.

The MATES project was developed to support Education Queensland (EQ) in attaining its workforce diversity goals by reducing the attrition of male pre-service teachers, promoting the teaching profession to men and supporting male in-service teachers. MATES strategies are intentionally teacher centred and focussed. Teachers play a powerful role in promoting or denigrating the profession to prospective educators. MATES prompts teachers to mentor pre-service colleagues, advocate their profession to senior schoolboys and reflect on their own teaching strategies. The project was trialed in the Bundaberg district in 2003 with support from Central Queensland University, EQ and the Catholic Education Commission.

BACKGROUND

Why do we need more male teachers?

The gender imbalance

The proportion of men within teaching ranks is declining significantly. Nelson (2003c) claims:

In 2002, the proportion of male primary teachers (within Australia) was only 20.9%. This is a decrease of five percentage points over only a decade and the decrease will continue...

The diminishing presence of male teachers is a global issue. NEA (2003) research indicates only nine percent of American elementary school teachers are men.

The data depicts an increasingly bleak projection and continual decline in male teaching numbers will continue unless effective intervention strategies are promptly implemented.

Across the nation, there are only 4247 males who are training to be primary teachers, which is 18.8 per cent of the total number of teachers in primary training – less than one in five. (Nelson, 2003a

Many campaigners (Biddulph, 1997, Walling, 2002) for increasing the male presence within our schools link the escalating disengagement and declining achievement of boys with the reduced male teacher presence.

Declining Achievement of Boys

Education Queensland (1999, p17) supports inclusive practices and ‘the right for all students to access education that leads to learning outcomes consistent with their potential.’ Research (Commonwealth of Australia, 2002) suggests boys are achieving at a significantly lower rate than girls and not meeting their potential. Rowe & Rowe (2002, p. 2) concur with the decline:

The evidence indicating that boys, on average, achieve at significantly lower levels than girls on ALL areas of the assessed cognitive curriculum throughout their primary and secondary schooling is not in dispute...Indeed, there is a widening gap between the academic performance of girls and boys in Australia.

Rowe, the research director of the Australian Council for Educational Research, warns against aligning boys’ declining achievement with teacher gender.

...the quality of teaching and learning provision with major emphasis on literacy and related verbal reasoning and written communication skills are by far the most salient influences on students’ cognitive, affective, and behavioural outcomes of schooling – regardless of either student or teacher gender. (Rowe & Rowe 2002, p. 1)

These views contrast those given to the Commonwealth Inquiry on Boys’ Education by Dr Peter West (2002, p. 5) who recommends ‘careful attention (be) given to roles played by fathers and other men in encouraging boys to learn.’ Male teacher advocates highlight the benefits positive adult male role models contribute to enhancing student learning outcomes.

Fewer Positive Male Role Models

Providing students with male role models has been highlighted by educational reports and policy documents worldwide (Education Queensland, 2002a; Teacher Training Agency, 1999)

It is also evident that there is concern about the lack of male role models in the teaching profession for young boys. Among other factors, the lack of male role models or authority figures in schools may influence the attitude of boys towards schooling in general. (Education Queensland 2002a, p. 1)

Mills, Martino & Lingard (2004, p. 356) argue this stance is flawed and demeaning to female teachers.

...the dominant constructions of masculinity implied within calls for more male role models for boys potentially denigrate the work being done in schools by female teachers, and may be harmful to girls in schools and to gender relations in general.

Protagonists (West, 2004; Nelson, 2004) for increasing male teacher numbers highlight the need to provide students with more male role

models as schools increasingly become a 'no-man's land' and are becoming less able to provide this positive influence.

Australian families are becoming increasingly sole parent in nature. Dr Peter West (2002), head of the Research Group for Men and Families at University of Western Sydney, emphasises men are struggling to be better fathers but are reluctant to seek help from doctors and colleagues. Michael Carr-Gregg, leading Australian adolescent psychologist, estimates

...fathers spend an average of six minutes a day in presence of their sons and only 14 seconds in meaningful conversation (cited in Nelson 2004)

This lends weight to the argument that schools have an increasing and significant responsibility to provide boys and girls with a positive and stable male presence which Australian society seems increasingly less likely or willing to provide.

Do Students Benefit From Having Male Teachers?

Few campaigners for increased male teacher numbers have successfully identified explicit skills or attributes male teachers bring to schools and how these might benefit both male and female students.

Research Project

In 2004 thirty-five teachers (drawn from two local Bundaberg primary schools) and eighteen school and district office administrators voluntarily participated in a survey which sought to identify educators' views on whether any valued teaching qualities were more likely to be demonstrated by male teachers. Central Queensland University (Office of Research) and Bundaberg District Office (EQ) approved the conduct of the survey. Field notes and interviews supplemented the survey findings. The research findings may serve to justify the call for a more gender balanced EQ teaching workforce and the provision of a support program for male pre and in-service teachers.

Participants responded to the following questions:

- Do you believe schools would benefit from a balance of male/female teachers? (EQ target Male 35% Female 65%)
- Do you believe male teachers bring special skills/attributes to the classroom and/or school?
- Would students experience adverse social or educational effects if male teaching numbers continue to decline?

The findings of this survey suggest a link does exist between the demonstration of some identified positive teaching attributes and teacher gender.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

The benefits of gender balance

Table 1: Do schools benefit from a balance of male/female teachers?

Do you believe schools would benefit from a balance of male/female teachers? (Education Queensland target Male 35% Female 65%)			
Respondent	Yes	No	Abstain
Administrators	100%		
Teachers	97%		3%

Respondents cited many examples of how a gender balanced workforce benefits a school community. In reviewing the responses the following themes emerged:

- Enhanced relationships
- Improved diversity
- Reduced behaviour management issues

Attributes of the male teacher

Table 2: Do male teachers demonstrate special attributes?

Do you believe male teachers bring special skills/attributes to the classroom and/or school?			
Respondent	Yes	No	Abstain
Administrators	83%	17%	
Teachers	74%	17%	9%

Respondents have substantiated their support by providing examples of the special skills/attributes which male teachers demonstrate. These have been grouped as follows:

- Experience and special interests
- Positive masculine role model
- Engaging male learners
- Sense of humour and demeanour

Effects of reduced male teacher contact

Table 3: Do students experience adverse social or academic effects with reduced male teacher contact?

Would students experience adverse social or educational effects if male teaching numbers continue to decline?			
Respondent	Yes	No	Abstain
Administrators	83%	6%	11%
Teachers	91%	6%	3%

Participants favoured the belief that declining male teacher numbers will lead to adverse student social and educational effects. Respondents highlighted that acquiring communication and interaction skills with both genders are vital aspects of social development.

Table 8: Findings Summary

Benefits of gender balance within the teaching workforce	
Benefits	Support Quotations
<p>Enhanced relationships</p> <p>Staff</p> <p>Teacher/parent</p> <p>Interaction modelled to students</p>	<p><i>‘Women (generally) tend to get very personal and more emotional which can impact on school moral if not balanced with male’s more easy going nature’</i></p> <p><i>‘This (gender balance) will result in improved interactions with BOTH parents. Some fathers are more comfortable interacting with male teachers’</i></p> <p><i>‘Students need to see the interactions of adult men and women in a social and work context’</i></p>
<p>Expanded workforce diversity</p> <p>Developing tolerance and challenging stereotypes</p> <p>Variety of teaching/learning processes</p>	<p><i>‘Children benefit from positive role models and mentors of all kinds (males, females, academic, sporting, artistic, indigenous, etc). With a decline in numbers of male teachers, the breadth of these examples is diminishing significantly’</i></p> <p><i>‘Males don’t necessarily make better teachers but they do have a different way of connecting with children. This can often be advantageous when negotiating with problem students. Shared interests, and in some cases, similar experiences create a degree of empathy between male teachers and students- especially males, which can only enhance the teaching-learning environment and process.’</i></p>
<p>Fewer behaviour management issues</p>	<p><i>‘With female dominated classrooms boys issues can be suppressed. Without the opportunity to see male perspectives or anticipate male problems, female teachers will suffer greater confrontation and aggression from adolescent boys in particular’</i></p>
<p>School maintenance</p>	<p><i>‘Males’ physical strength and ‘fixing’ ability is often called upon’</i></p>

Table 8: Findings Summary (cont)

Male Teacher Attributes	
Attribute	Support Quotations
<i>Experience and special interests</i>	<i>‘Male students would tend to relate better to the experiences and interests of male teachers. This can be the foundation for the establishment of an important relationship between teacher and student’</i>
<i>Positive masculine role model</i>	<i>‘As a father of daughters I believe it is essential that they be exposed to a variety of masculine role models, in order for them to develop a balanced perspective of the male/female dichotomy. Successful, confident, inspirational male teachers are an important component in developing young adults’</i>
<i>Engage male learners</i>	<i>‘Males better understand the ways boys think and work. There is a natural gender alignment. Females/girls tend to be more verbose and complicated, males more structured and succinct needing clear simplistic guidelines with strict boundaries’</i>
<i>Sense of humour</i>	<i>‘Males tend to use humour more in their interactions with students (where as females tend to have more interactions related to nurturing)’</i>
Effects of Reduced Contact with Male Teachers	
Effect	Support Quotations
<i>Limited communication capacity</i>	<i>‘I grew up in a family of girls with a father who worked away from home. I didn’t have a male teacher until Year 7 and was initially totally intimidated by his manner and teaching style. I grew to appreciate his humour and learnt to interact with him, but would have benefited from this experience much earlier. More males in Early Childhood classes please!’</i>
<i>Increasingly marginalised male students</i>	<i>‘Fewer male teachers could lead to the possibility of an increase in male youth suicide due to the reduction in numbers of potential ‘significant adult males’ involved in the lives of young males’</i>

What is MATES (Male Teacher Support project)?

MATES aims to assist EQ achieve workforce diversity targets through supporting male pre-service and in-service teachers and encouraging more males to consider teaching as a preferred career choice by:

- Supporting male pre-service teachers in training through a mentoring and literacy support program
- Marketing and promoting the profession to males (especially male senior high school students)
- Supporting in-service male teachers through expanding networks, acknowledging their contribution and facilitating engaging professional development

Bundaberg CQU pre-service teachers are almost three times more likely to be supervised by female teachers throughout their practicums. Male pre-service teachers have limited or no contact with male supervisors. These prospective teachers have minimal opportunity to witness and be guided in developing a male teacher perspective, and will enter the profession unprepared for (and possibly unaware of) the isolation and tribulations that many male teachers encounter. 28.5 percent of BLM (Bundaberg) students will not encounter a male perspective throughout the total practicum program. The MATES project partners male pre-service students with male teacher mentors and facilitates a supportive guiding network which pre-service teachers can draw on as they construct responses to male teacher dilemmas now and in the future.

Overview

In 2003 Alan Bowmaker and Steve Smith developed and piloted the MATES project within the Bundaberg district of Queensland, Australia. The pilot involved 25 first and second year Central Queensland University (CQU) male pre-service teachers, 28 local primary and secondary male teachers and was supported by Education Queensland, Catholic Education Commission and CQU.

The project has 2 predominant goals:

- A. Reduce male teacher trainee student deferral/attrition rates (at each university campus) by 10% for each year of the MATES project.
- B. Increase male enrolment into university teacher preparation courses by 10% for each year of the MATES project until male enrolment exceeds 35% of total course enrolments.

Participation by stakeholders was voluntary and the student teaching performance was not formally assessed. Monitoring and review methods were anchored primarily in discussions, surveys and the taking of field notes.

Students selected one or two mentors. The mentor/student partnership determined the amount of contact, the roles and workload assumed by the student. Students were encouraged to identify specific needs and concerns which their mentors might assist them in addressing. These concerns included:

- How does a male teacher develop a positive rapport with female students?

- How does a male teacher meld and project strength with a caring, supportive demeanour?
- What are some of the roles a male teacher is expected to adopt at school?
- How do male teachers maintain morale in an isolated work environment?

Feedback indicates involvement in the project has benefited students and teachers. Teachers expressed appreciation for the innovative and engaging mentor training and acknowledgement of their skills and commitment. They also highlighted that contact with pre-service teachers has prompted them to reflect and refine their pedagogical practices.

Students valued the opportunity to observe and develop skills relating to the male teacher presence within the classroom. They also highlighted the benefit of expanding professional and social networks; develop their teaching competence within a supportive, non threatening or assessment focussed environment; and the opportunity to interact with students and further develop their pedagogical skills beyond their formal practicums.

The mentoring support was complemented by an aggressive marketing campaign. This program included the development of a promotional video featuring local teachers, sample bags and presentations. University staff, students and primary teachers were involved in the delivery of the marketing program to local secondary year 12 students and local men, at school visits, career fairs and university expos. Male teachers are inspiring models and powerful influences on student values (West 2004). MATES encourages teachers to utilise this influence in promoting the teaching profession as a possible career direction for male schoolboys.

In 2004 student support was expanded by including a ‘men mentoring men in literacy’ component whereby skilled second and third year male students mentored first year male students in such areas as topic interpretation, analytical writing and referencing.

The pilot outcomes have exceeded expectations. Project partners are supporting further expansion of the trial throughout regional Queensland.

Has MATES succeeded in attracting and retaining pre-service male teachers?

The project has 2 predominant goals:

- A)** Reduce male teacher trainee student deferral/attrition rates (at each university campus) by 10% for each year of the MATES project.

Outcome:

Throughout 2003 twenty-five first and second year Bachelor of Learning Management students voluntarily participated in the MATES pilot.

At the completion of the academic year (December 2003) all 25 students (100%) were continuing with their BLM degree studies.

Also: All 28 male teacher mentors continue to be employed as teachers.

- B)** Increase male enrolment into university teacher preparation courses by 10% for each year of the MATES project until male enrolment exceeds 35% of total course enrolments.

BLM CQU Bundaberg **2003** first yr. enrolment as at 31/3/03:

BLM (Prim):	Total	70 (16 male: 23%)
BLM (Early Childhood)	Total	34 (2 male: 6%)
Combined (QTAC 2003)	Total	104 (18 male: 17%)

Outcome:

BLM CQU Bundaberg **2004** first yr. enrolment as at 31/3/04

BLM (Prim):	Total	66 (25 male: 38%)
BLM (Early Childhood)	Total	23 (0 male: 0%)
Combined (QTAC 2004)	Total	89 (25 male: 28%)

25 males were enrolled in first yr. BLM (Prim) at Bundaberg campus as at 31/3/04
This is a 56% increase on male March 2003 enrolments (prim). 38% male enrolment in pre-service teacher training is more than double the national average.

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