Being a female PE teacher in an all-boys’ school

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The link between physical education (PE) and masculinity is unequivocal. Since its inception in the Australian school curriculum around the turn of the 20th Century, PE has a history of privileging the so-called masculine desires to be active and compete. In the contemporary climate where the educational performance of boys has become a considerable source of social anxiety, the literature points to factors such as a lack of male role models, the feminisation of curriculum and the lack of ‘boy friendly’ pedagogies as key factors. This backdrop poses some interesting questions about the contributions that female PE teachers make to development of contemporary masculinity. Drawing on a narrative research methodology, this research set out to explore the experiences of female PE teachers working in all-boys’ schools.

Background

An historical profile of physical education (PE) and sport in Australian schools presents them as a prominent vehicle through which messages of gender and sexuality are transported. While their goals and practice have shifted across time, their respective and collective roles in privileging hegemonic forms of masculinity have been strong and sustained (Brown, 1999, Bryson, 1987, Crawley, 1998, Dewar, 1987, Drummond, 2000, Gilbert and Gilbert, 1998, Lenskyj, 1998, Messner, 1989). In its earliest form, PE existed in the school curriculum as ‘physical training for boys (Kirk and Twigg, 1995). Following this was an increasing emphasis on performance and competition availed through team games. Before PE evolved to become a vehicle for teaching all children the basic skills needed to participate in team sports, such opportunities were the restricted privilege of (physically competent) males. Changed teaching practices and Government legislation, such as the introduction of Title IX during the late 1970s in the United States, Anti-discrimination Acts in the United Kingdom and Australia, and the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, were part of a wider shift toward equal opportunities for females. Such legislation provided, “the means to argue that women and men should have equal access to the resources, opportunities, occupations, courses and media coverage associated with sport and physical education” (Wright, 1999, p 182).

This history is particularly relevant when considering the concerns around the contemporary educational practices of boys. It is well documented that a degree of moral panic now exists amongst educators, politicians, policy makers, academics and parents around the perceived underachievement of boys (Biddulph, 1995, Browne and Fletcher, 1995, Frank, Kehler, Lovell and Davison, 2003, Hawkes, 2001, McKay, Messner and Sabo, 2000, McLean, 1997, Rowe, 2004). Coupled with their over-representation in courts, hospitals and morgues, and there a rising concern around the profile of young males (Hartman, 1999, p 18). Members of the men’s rights movement contend that boys’ underachievement in education is a by-product of the lack of educational provision currently being dedicated to the particular needs of young males. They name a lack of male role models in schools, the feminisation of curriculum and a lack of boy friendly pedagogies as reasons for boys’ general disengagement. Leaving aside the formidable critiques that have been levelled at this argument (Epstein, Elwood and Hey, 1998, Kenway, Willis, Blackmore and Rennie, 1997) they underpin contemporary calls for more male teachers and more male friendly content (PE).

The deconstruction of past practices in physical education and sport is characterised by the carriage of masculine discourses and practices and the construction of gender binaries around what it means to be male and female. Given this background it is not at all surprising that, despite the success of equalisation practices in other disciplines, concerns about masculine privilege continue to resonate around physical education and sport. Connell (2004)
suggests that there continue to be a few “masculinity vortices” in schools wherein the practices of “masculinity formation are intensely active” (p. 7). Here, he identifies subjects associated with manual arts and technical drawing, school sport and physical education and the discipline system. Within the wide range of popular and scholarly literature that has emerged around the contemporary social and educational performances boys’ is a concern that the women’s movement has gone too far. Such commentators concur that in their quest for equal opportunity feminists have made schools (and homes) less ‘boy-friendly’ (Biddulph, 1995, Browne and Fletcher, 1995, Hawkes, 2001, Pollack, 1998). They point to data that portrays the over-representation of boys in low achievement data and in discipline programs as being the direct result of the ‘feminisation of education’. Millet (1999, in Ashley and Lee, 2003) goes further and asserts that the feminisation of education (defined as an increase in the number of women to the profession) has lead to a decrease in males getting involved in the teaching profession. The consequence, of course, is a further decline in the presence of ‘good’ male role models for boys.

It is against this backdrop that we developed an interest in what it is like to be a female PE teacher in an all-boys’ school. On a continuum of gender differentiation in mainstream education we felt that being a female PE teacher in an all-boys’ school would be at a pointy end. This paper reports on a research project undertaken to explore the experiences of these women. Located within a qualitative methodology the research drew on narrative methods to gather, interpret and represent the stories of six female PE teachers. The paper begins with a brief description of a research methodology and methods. Guiding the research were two core questions. How the women came to be practising PE teachers in all-boys’ schools? and, How do they construct and manage their professional identity? Underpinning this is the idea that this ‘professional identity’ is not natural, and is developed across a range of, formal and informal, experiences, interactions and professional development activities. The paper concludes with a discussion of the sorts of support and training that is needed to assist female PE teachers to work effectively in all-boys’ schools.

The research

The six teachers who consented to participate in the project did so in the knowledge that the project complied with national of research ethics protocols. The recruitment process began with an identification of the (local) sample group. Of the 365 Secondary schools in Victoria 29 are all-boys’ schools. Within this group there are currently 191 PE teachers, of which only 25 are female. On the basis of proximity, 14 of these teachers were informed of the study and asked about their willingness to participate. Six were finally chosen to participate in a 60-90 minute interview. The interviews took place at times and locations convenient to the participants, outside of school working hours, and were recorded and later transcribed. Pseudonyms were given to the participants at the time of transcription and were used thereafter. Prior to each interview a background profile was gathered on each participant, covering their family, education and professional histories. Sufficient to say that the participants ranged in age (28-52 years), teaching experience (4-24 years), experience teaching in a boys’ school (2-13 years), and in their philosophies about the function of PE in the school curriculum and what represented good practice. All six had rich histories in sport’s participation and all but one had strong connections with male sporting siblings.

Propelled by the principles of qualitative research, our interest in the experiences of female PE teachers in all-boys’ schools sought to accommodate the contextual and contingent nature of ‘meaning’. The application of a narrative methodology provided a framework for both gathering teacher’s experiences and exploring the meanings they attached to them. Here, we subscribe to Connolly and Clandinin’s (1990) depiction of humans as “…storytelling organisms who, individually and socially, lead storied lives” (p. 2). Within this context we acknowledge that “…people weave life experiences into coherent stories, or narratives, in ways that reconstruct images of themselves and the groups or communities with which they affiliate” (Lightfoot, 1997, p. 2). Through semi-structured interview process we sought to provide the teachers with an invitation to describe the ways they understand and practice their professional identity. Here, the participants were invited/prompted to reflect on their teaching practices, relationships and environmental influences by recounting particular incidents and events that have stood out to them. Within this framework the interviews sought to explore various triumphs and challenges that the teachers have experienced while teaching in all-boys schools. Inherent in this process was an interest in exploring any professional barriers or blockers that the participants’ believed were directly related to their gender. The chance to discuss any successes they have experienced in this male dominated area may provide affirmation and contribute to feelings of being valued within this school.

Our analysis of the data was informed by a view that to develop a professional identity as a female PE teacher in an all-boys’ school is not something that just comes naturally. It is, also, not fixed or stable. From this perspective the construction of a professional identity as a successful female PE teacher in an all boys’ school is something that needs to be developed. Various authorities, within and outside of the school, have different responsibilities for facilitating this development. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to engage in detailed theoretical discussion, we found Michel Foucault’s ideas about the ways in which we develop a ‘care of the self’, and the particular characteristics that this self should exhibit (2000a & , 2000b) particularly valuable here. Within this framework, identity can be understood as the development of a specific relationship to oneself and others (in relation to how others seek to govern us) in the presentation of a professional identity. To be a professional is to be a person who must do certain, quite specific work on oneself so that one can be considered a particular kind of person – in this case a competent PE teacher. Of particular interest to us, were the strategies and techniques that female PE teachers used to negotiate an accepted and equitable existence alongside their male counterparts.

Findings

The interviews with the research participants provided rich insights into a wide range of the experiences of female physical education teachers in all-boys’ school. From the array of issues and themes that emerged from the data we will focus here on just two.
i. A path less travelled

None of the six female PE teachers we spoke to in the conduct of this research (namely, Molly, Georgia, Marie, Catherine, Aimee and Sarah) admitted to actively choosing to work in an all-boys school. While two of the participants applied for their current positions, their respective circumstances propelled them to pursue any teaching job they could get. Molly applied for her position on the grounds that she had heard it was a good school. Having had some negative teaching experiences in what she considered to be “bad schools” (read low decile and under-resourced), she was intent on getting a job in a good school. While she was not really keen on working in an all-boys school her reservations did not deter her from applying for a position. Sarah’s application to teach in an all-boys school was largely driven by her (urgent) need for employment. As a single mother, Sarah was prepared to “take any job to keep the wolf from the door”.

‘…after the birth of my son I really needed to get back to work. Beggars can’t be choosers, so when this came up I thought I’ll have a go at it’. (Sarah)

Georgia, Marie, Catherine and Aimee described how they had no intentions of actively seeking work in boys’ schools. Indeed, they had each been enticed into applying for jobs in boy’s schools through personal connections and networks. As Georgia explained, “it found me”. Aimee described her passage to being a PE teacher in an all-boys’ school as “pot luck”. On moving to a new town, a friend of Aimee’s husband had identified her as a potential recruit to the school. “It just kind of happened. I was told about a position so I rang the Principal. Next thing I know I’m….”. Catherine described how professional teacher aspirations had never included wanting to teach PE in an all-boys’ school. After 20 years of happily teaching in co-educational settings it was Catherine’s interest in providing the best educational opportunities for her son that put her in conversation with an all-boys’ school.

‘I had never had anything to do with boys’ schools, but having a son of my own, particularly as he was coming through primary school, I was beginning to really wonder why girls achieved better than boys at school…So the challenge for me was to see if I was willing to open my mind to it a bit and explore it, and so see if I could find the best way to educate boys, so I applied.’ (Catherine)

To a lesser and greater extent, all four teachers described initial feelings of apprehension when the job first presented itself. Their initial reluctance was generally overcome by their personal sense of curiosity and by the assurances/encouragement of friends and colleagues. Marie explained how a colleague who taught in a boys school had described it as easier because, “the boys are so keen often they don’t even eat their lunch…they are that keen for a bit of activity”.

‘Their level of activity is positive, they just love to get into it and they do actually listen…they like to improve their skills…because they approach it in a really positive manner it makes it so much easier for you as a teacher and more enjoyable’. (Aimee)

When reflecting on their early contemplations about taking on the role of a female PE teacher’s in boys’ schools all six participants revealed an awareness of the challenge it presented. In constructing and performing their professional identity as PE teachers in an all boys setting, they recognised that gender was clearly going to be an issue. While all teachers are charged with the responsibility of being role models, the participants revealed an added sense of responsibility around this charter. Rather than be threatened by their marginality, they shared a common belief that the position would provide them with an opportunity to contribute to the formation of healthy gender relations. To this end, the participants shared a common philosophy that getting boys to respect females (particularly in the context of sport) was a challenge that demanded the input of females. By providing positive role modelling the participants felt that they could help to break down gender stereotypes that position females as weak and submissive. As female PE teachers in all-boy settings they would be responsible for nurturing a more balanced approach to the constructions of gender. Here, they would walk the gender boarders of being not too soft but not too hard, not too strong and not too weak, not too assertive but not too meek, and so on. How they presented themselves was something that would NOT be left to chance.

‘It was explained to me that, amongst other things, the value of having us in the Department was that we can be role models to the boys, as women in sport who are feminine and not necessarily domineering and aggressive and overly masculine. They can see that women can be successful in sport and strong and skilful and still maintain their femininity and be a bit girly, have long hair and wear lipstick’. (Molly)

ii. The construction of a professional identity

‘I often think that when I speak to them as a Coordinator they may wonder what their mum would think of that, and that is a huge influence on boys, their relationship with their mums…I feel my dealings with the boys is a bit like and iron first in a velvet glove’. (Catherine)

Despite the apparent clarity around their professional mission, as female PE teachers in boy’s schools, the implementation of these goals was problematic. In the above comment, Catherine reveals the schizophrenic nature of her professional identity. At one level she recognises that her gender supports a different type of connection with male students, than that of her male colleagues. Likening her presence to that of a motherly advisor, she distances herself from any connotations of ‘softness’ or ‘paternity’ that might accompany such a profile. The juxtaposing of an ‘iron first in a velvet glove’ captures the contradictory nature of her professional identity. Whether we take this comment literally or whether we examine it as a metaphor for the contradictory gender positions that Catherine traverses in her professional life, a number of points are worthy of comment. The pursuit of a successful professional profile clearly drives the development of techniques and strategies that assist her to maintain a legitimate female identity in an all-boy setting. Of course, the success of these strategies is contingent on many factors that Catherine does not control. Central to her success is the extent to which the school (through its culture and practices) is able to provide an environment that supports and respects gender difference.

‘They asked if I was worried about how the boys would perceive me and I said well the way they treat me will come from you – the male staff around me. If you treated me with a lack of respect then I would expect the boys would do the same!’ (Catherine)

A prominent signifier in the presentation of a teaching identity is seen to be their capacity to gain attention and respect of their students. In the context of PE teaching this has
long been distilled as a teacher’s capacity to control, order and manage the learning environment (Tinning, 1997). Indeed, dominant pedagogical discourse holds that a good PE teacher ought to be able to control and regulate student behaviour/activity. While this is an impost that all PE teachers confront, the capacity to fulfil this expectation is experienced differently – by different teachers in different settings. While all six participants were disciples to the technocratic rationality of student management (as the key indicator of best practice), they were united in their recognition of their disadvantage in pursuit of this end. This disadvantage was almost inclusively attached to their gender. As females, operating in an all-boy’s educational context they were clearly faced with behavioural issues that were unique. The rowdy, aggressive and disruptive behaviours that are both empirically and stereo-typically associated with boys in schools, were seen to have an exaggerated (potential) influence in their classes. It is clearly more than folklore that boys tend to push the boundaries a little more with female teachers.

‘I think we have to work harder for it than male teachers, but I think once you have sort of set your boundaries, set your guidelines and shown that you know what you are talking about, they will still listen to you. The guys (male PE teachers) don’t have to work as hard for that, …we’ve got to work for it’. (Aimee)

‘If you have kids that hold the stereotype for a women, that they are meek and mild, like they may be with some of their mums – they can do anything and get away with it…they think that female teachers are the same and that they can treat them like that’. (Georgia)

While many aspects of male tradition, ritual and culture exerted ongoing pressure on them, all participants identified the intense presence of male groupness as their greatest challenge. Across the data set there are recurring references to the difference between individual and group behaviour. It was unequivocal that when boys formed groups to team-up their presence is at its most intimidating. When part of their collective power was generated around domination of the ‘other’, being a female PE teacher can be a vulnerable existence. It was not uncommon for boys to govern relationships around “respect and tolerance”. Whereas male PE teachers were seen to have a disempowering effect, rejecting their femininity was seen to be outright dangerous. The propensity for their femininity to be subordinated (weak and soft), objectified (sexualised) or masculinised (being butch, ‘having balls’ or being dikes) was ever-present and thus required ongoing reconciliation and management.

‘I know it sounds stupid but there are so many stereotypes out there these days you would get the old school typical label of the butch female PE teacher…I don’t think that is one thing they need either…to be thinking that all females who play sport are butch’. (Aimee)

Notwithstanding the tensions and contestations that are confronted by female PE teachers working in all-boy’s settings, all of the participants were satisfied with contribution they make to providing a balanced educational environment for young males to learn in. Prominent in this assessment was their unanimous identification of the different student-teacher relationships that are forged by male and female teachers. The participants shared a perception that the relationships they have with their male students are based on deeper levels of communication, grounded in an increased emphasis on fairness and tolerance. Whereas male PE teachers were seen to build their relationships on a “matey basis”, Sarah described female teachers as being more inclined to build their relationships around “respect and tolerance”.

‘I think we make good sounding boards for kids…because I have a good relationship with my students…often they are indecisive about things, I think that guys talk to female teachers better in that situation than male teachers’. (Aimee)

‘I hope that I portray a more relaxed atmosphere in PE that is about having a good time…especially for kids who aren’t overly competitive, it still gives them a chance to get involved and not think, “Oh no, I got beaten again”’. (Georgia)

Implications

As a data-set, the interview transcripts provide valuable insights into some of the challenges and complexities that female PE teachers confront working in all-boy’s schools. Prominent here is the observation that none of the participants had actively identified working in boys’ schools as a preferred career pathway. Compliant with this, none of the six identified any specific experience or training that they had done that they felt had prepared them for the particularities of such a job. Rather, the participants were provoked by the opportunity that had presented itself to them and a ‘give it a go’ attitude. On taking up the invitation to teach in an all-boy’s school all six participants recognised that their gender had a strong potential
to be a marginalising influence within this context. Counteracting this was their shared belief that as female teachers in all-boys’ schools they were in a unique position to contribute to the development of more tolerant and respectful gender relations. Within this context, being a female enabled them the opportunity to insert feminist perspectives into contexts that might otherwise be dominated by hegemonic forms of masculinity (Connell, 1995). Within this context there is strong empirical evidence that groups of sporty males (often referred to as ‘the jocks’) can be powerful gatekeepers of a masculinity rooted in hardness, resilience and solidarity (Lefkowitz, 1997). On taking up the role of PE teacher in all-boys’ schools these women appeared to willingly take on the responsibility of being front-line gender workers.

The focus of this paper on the (self-reported) experiences of female PE teachers in all-boys’ schools has sought to expose them as knowable. In the evolution of this role questions emerge about the nature of this work, how to recruit the best people, what sort of training is needed and who should provide it. Further to this is the need to better understand the sorts of pedagogic practices that best serve female PE teachers in all-boys’ schools. The fundamental proposition behind this research is that boys benefit from the participation of female PE teachers. This ushers in new ways of thinking about role and purpose of PE teachers, and the activities, practices and processes that are deployed in the delivery of the discipline.

The challenge, in research terms, is to continue the process of identifying ways in which the participation of female PE teachers in all-boys’ schools can be encouraged and enhanced. While this certainly has implications for future practices in both university pre-service PE courses and beginning teachers, it is unlikely that these different, often competing, interests, could be fully reconciled. After all, as Foucault (1983) would argue, a ‘society without power relations can only be an abstraction’ (pp 222-223). Given the ongoing nature of their struggles it is appropriate to identify and analyse the forms of knowledge that make these issues, their challenges, and their solutions knowable and manageable. We have done some of that work in this paper. The challenge, in research terms, is to continue the process of identifying and analysing the ways in which the identity of female PE teachers in all-boys schools is constructed and problematised.

‘It is important to be positive but when you strip it all back you are either able to take control, or you are a doormat. … I don’t think you could be a doormate female PE teacher in an all-boys’ school. (Marie)

References


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Author’s Notes

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