SUMMARY


ABSTRACT

This arts-informed narrative inquiry will delve into the experiences of male B.Ed. teacher candidates in Northern Ontario who did not complete their education degree. Their intersectional voices will, hopefully, fuel dialogue around issues of power dynamics and intersectional identity (race, class, gender, sexual orientation, geographical location, and language and culture) applicable to education, male studies, social justice, arts-informed and arts-based educational research, and affiliated disciplines. This paper begins with a brief review of the literature on male primary teachers, then research methodology, next a look at theory, followed by a fictional, composite, narrative monologue in the voice of a former teacher candidates, and culminates in the researchers’ impressions and questions.

METHODOLOGY

We employ an arts-informed approach to create a fictional, yet plausible and poignant composite character to represent our data, inspired by the Latin American testimonio, a novel or novella produced in written text, told in the first person by a narrator who is the real protagonist of the events he encountered, and usually transcribed by a journalist, literary author, or ethnographer. Our fictionalized, composite character, Rod, is thirty, white, and working-class. He was raised in a mid-sized city and has battled with emotional problems throughout much of his life. He withdrew from a primary-junior B.Ed. program in a Northern Ontario university since 2000. He was the first generation in his family to successfully gain a university education, as the B.Ed. programs all require a pre-requisite undergraduate degree. Rod is Anglophone and protestant and attended the public school system as a child and teenager. He held a series of blue collar jobs until returning to university as a mature student. Through venturing into his background, entry into, and subsequent exodus from the female-dominated career path of primary school teacher education, we gain narrative insights into our participants’ lived experiences, important to Faculties of Education, policy makers, education students, and the broader field of male studies.

RESEARCHERS’ IMPRESSIONS

We are struck by the multiplicities of meaning making as we negotiate this arts-informed narrative analysis process. We are conscious of the qualitative researcher’s eternal struggle: what do we do with the bits of data that end up on the cutting room floor? Our postmodern and poststructuralist sensibilities are no comfort. We want to know more

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about our participants, and consider an in-depth life story approach as a complement to our current research. We do indeed suspect that our participants experienced a stifling of the more sensitive, caring emotions as youths, and responded with aggressive and self-destructive behaviors, such as drinking, drugs, fighting, truancy and disengagement from school. This phenomenon is well-documented in research, as boys frequently are socialized to repress emotions and behaviors problematically seen as ‘girlish,’ such as being studious or sensitive, and to instead present bravado and a ‘bad boy’ persona (Faludi, 1999; Lingard & Douglas, 1999; Mac an Ghaill, 2000); we suspect that this phenomenon may be particularly pronounced for some working class boys, like all of our participants.

That all participants were working class brought up a myriad of questions regarding linguistic and cultural capital (Harker, Mahar, & Wilkes, 1990). In other words, we ponder the ways the participants’ talk (discourse), engage in social interactions, and display tastes in dress, eating habits, travel, and their engagements with ‘low’ and ‘high’ culture, and how this might have influenced their integration into a middle-class profession? Since teachers’ professional identities are largely founded on the notion of shared beliefs and expectations (Mitchell, 1997), had these working class men missed subtle and not so-subtle cues that make one ‘part of the [teacher] crowd’? Had a similar phenomenon occurred in their teenage years, when drug use, rebellion, and alienation disenfranchised them from school, also often seen as having a middle class curriculum? Since they seem to long for middle class lives and security but hold blue collar jobs, what are the costs of their disillusionment and discontent? Beyond the burdens of finances, had the expectations of their youth and adulthood as males, generated from self, family, teachers, friends, community and pop culture, whether explicitly spoken, or implicitly unspoken but insinuated, inhibited the nurturing of ‘the right stuff’ to navigate though teacher education? After all, despite adversity, all had eventually been able to successfully obtain a high school diplomas and at least one university degree prior to enrolment in a faculty of education. Furthermore, there are working class men who successfully graduate from teacher education program, enter the teaching profession, and even proceed to advancements. How might their stories differ, and that of their middle class male peers?

Our participants attempted to enter the teaching profession where caring and compassion are expected and commonly viewed as normal, commonplace teacher attributes. However, we must question even this supposition. Our own experiences as teachers, and we have over thirty-five years between us in the K-12 system, as well as our research, leads us to postulate that there is a hidden and sometimes overt atmosphere of violence in schools. In fact, many of our pupils are made to feel that they do not belong in K-12 (Botstein, 1997), and we extend this to teacher candidates, teachers, parents-guardians, and other adults affiliated with schools. We propose the notion of symbolic violence to better understand this discord. Symbolic violence, as opposed to physical violence, may be seen as acts that dehumanize, alienate, demoralize and threaten (Gosse, Labrie, Grimard, & Roberge, 2000); these acts may even be inactions, subconscious, and implicit. For instance, there was repeated policing of the male teacher candidates hugging children, or holding hands, that was not reported as an issue for their female colleagues. This policing of male affection toward children and comforting at various times in our research took the guise of: (a) common, accepted, public knowledge, (b) teacher
candidates’ vague self-sense of ill ease, and (c) verbal warnings by associate teachers, faculty advisors, tenured teachers, administrators, and professors about the potential of being perceived as a sexual aggressor or pedophile.

Also, symbolic violence may result from transgressions of unwritten codes, and these codes be socially endorsed. For example, we must deconstruct the persistent belief that females are better suited to child caretaking, or that males who care for children are potential sexual aggressors, so that entry into this historically women’s space may no longer be viewed by so many as a trespass, and thus treated with distrust and even hostility. When viewed as a transgression of an unwritten code and a trespass into women’s space, this kind of symbolic violence may take the forms of being ignored, inadequately mentored, or deprived of knowledge one needs to succeed, such as essential lesson planning strategies/support, or sharing of classroom management techniques. Thus, as sufferers of symbolic violence, our male teacher candidates’ relative reported helplessness is not surprising.

In this paper, we have generated an arts-informed narrative analysis around the halted paths of male primary school teacher candidates. We have explored issues of power around expectations and symbolic violence. Although we have presented a short storied glimpse into what is happening in the lives of teacher candidates, in particular, we hope to engage in further debate around issues of who benefits from the exclusion or inclusion of males in early childhood education, and possible consequences. Ultimately, we hope that examination of the struggles of male primary school teacher candidates may lead to greater awareness of the complexities of identity, symbolic violence, and expectations in order to generate new questionings.

REFERENCES