

Surviving a Feminized Profession: An Insight into Why Men Choose to Stay in Teaching

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Abstract

This study explored the plight of men operating in a highly feminized teaching profession and examined several reasons why they chose to remain in the classroom. In a random sample, 709 male teachers from the northern and southern parts of Trinidad were selected to participate in the study. A mixed-method research design was employed aimed at triangulating quantitative and qualitative data obtained from a survey questionnaire and focus group discussions. Findings of the study revealed that the majority of male teachers (94%) remained in the classroom because of what they described as their passion for teaching, and 96% of the respondents perceived of themselves as positive role models for young boys. Results of this study show that perhaps the time has come for us to re-examine the argument about men serving as role models for boys in the context of the Caribbean classroom. The results also have implications for education policy decision making aimed at not only retaining existing teachers but also attracting and recruiting new male teachers into the Trinidad and Tobago school system.

Keywords: male teachers, feminized teaching profession, male role models

INTRODUCTION

Feminization of the teaching profession has been the concern of scholars as well as several governments and media practitioners worldwide (Drudy, 2008; Fischman, 2007; Albisetti, 1993; Trouvé-Finding, 2005). In her paper on gender balance/gender bias, Drudy (2008) reports that, women make up more than ninety percent (90%) of primary teachers in Brazil, Russian Federation, Italy, and Slovakia. A similar trend exists in the United States, United Kingdom, and Ireland where eighty percent (80%) of all primary school teachers are women. In Trinidad and Tobago, women account for seventy-eight percent (78%) of primary teachers and sixty-nine (69%) of secondary teachers in the school system. Data from the Trinidad and Tobago Ministry of Education also reveal that male teachers account for only twenty-six percent (26%) of the thirteen thousand, three hundred and sixty-six (13, 366) teachers currently employed in the primary and secondary school system (Trinidad and Tobago, Ministry of Education (MOE, 2014).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Recent research has shown that the majority of men leave the Trinidad and Tobago teaching service for individual and contextual factors ranging from low salary and the desire to explore opportunities for upward mobility, to lack of parental and administrative support at the school (Joseph & Jackman, 2014). Some of these factors have been discussed in earlier studies on male attrition (Schaefer, Long & Clandinin, 2012; Gardner, 2010; Scherff, 2008; Elfers, Plecki & Knapp, 2006; Petterson, Roehrig & Luft, 2003). The question of low salaries has been specifically identified in other studies as a deterrent for men entering the teaching profession,

particularly at the primary school level (Cooney & Bittner, 2001; Johnson, McKeown & McEwen, 1999).

Other studies show that while there is a flight of men from the classroom, many men choose to remain largely because of the need to provide positive male models for young boys (Davison & Nelson, 2011; Allan, 1994; Priegert Coulter & McNay, 1993; Montecinos & Nielson, 1997; Thornton, 1999). However, Malaby and Ramsey (2011) argue that the merits of the male role model argument have been challenged as being naïve as highlighted in Sketton's (2003) study, and lacking empirical evidence, according to Gold and Reis (1982) in their study on male teacher effects on young children.

Men who choose to stay in the teaching profession are sometimes subjected to labels and stereotypes. According to Nelson (as cited in Malaby & Ramsey, 2011), such stereotypes hold that teaching is women's work and men who are willing to engage in women's work must be either gay or sexual predators. Notwithstanding these labels, some men regard teaching as a profession of choice and prefer to remain in the classroom despite possible challenges experienced by men who work in female dominated careers.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study, therefore, was to investigate why men choose to stay in a highly feminized teaching profession. Three research questions set the parameters for this study:

1. What are the pull factors that keep men in the Trinidad and Tobago teaching profession?
2. Does a relationship exist among factors such as teaching experience, qualifications, level of teaching and the decision to remain in the teaching service?
3. How do male teachers perceive their role regarding the boys they teach in the classroom?

METHODOLOGY

Participants and Measures

This study employed a mixed-method research design aimed at triangulating quantitative and qualitative data obtained from a survey questionnaire and focus group discussions. In a random sample, seven hundred and nine (709) male teachers were selected to participate in the study. These men were practising teachers in both primary and secondary schools located in the north and south of the country.

A survey instrument with six questions was used to obtain information on why men choose to remain in a highly feminized teaching profession. Respondents were required to express their opinions on a 5-point Likert-type scale. The survey instrument was pilot-tested and feedback was used to improve the instrument before distributing the questionnaires to the research sample.

Two focus group interviews were used also as a complementary instrument to collect qualitative data for the study. A purposive sample was drawn to participate in these focus group discussions. There were two heterogeneous groups comprising six (6) persons each. All questions were the same for both groups to facilitate consistency in analysis. One-hour long interview sessions were audio-taped and information from the recording was reviewed several times to obtain verbatim accounts from participants.

Techniques used to ensure credibility or validity of the interview process involved verbatim accounts of interviews, use of recording devices to capture data and participants' review of the researcher's synthesis of interviews.

Data Analysis

As part of the survey, participants were asked to discuss their reasons for remaining in the teaching service. Frequencies and descriptive statistics were conducted to provide information about the sample used in the study. Frequency tables were also developed for recording and tabulating demographic responses with the aid of the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software. These demographic responses included questions related to teaching experience, qualifications, and level of teaching. Statistical procedures such as Spearman's rho correlations were used to explore relationships among independent and dependent variables in the study.

RESULTS

In this study there were 709 participants with teaching experience ranging from 0-4 years to over 30 years (see Table 1 below). Based on the distribution of years of teaching experience, the majority of participants were identified as either developing professionals (51%) with 5-20 years of teaching experience or veteran teachers (30.7%) with over 20 years teaching experience. Participants with 0-4 years teaching experience (17.2%) were classified as novice teachers.

The sample was also classified based on level of teaching. Table 1 shows that the majority of participants, 61% (n=435), taught at the primary school level while 35.9%, (n=255) taught at secondary schools.

Academic qualifications varied among participants of the study. For example, the majority of the respondents, 53.2% (n=377), possessed Bachelor's degrees, while 11.8% (n=81) possessed qualifications at the Master's level. Of the participants with professional teacher training qualifications, 22.1% (n=157), possessed a Teacher's Diploma, with only 2.7% (n=19) possessing a Diploma in Education, and 2.8% (n=20) showing evidence of professional training at the Technical/Vocational level.

Table 1. Demographic Data of Participants

Demographic	N (%)
<i>Teaching Experience</i>	
Novice (0-4yrs)	122 (17.2)
Developing Professional (5-20 yrs)	361 (51.0)
Veteran (>20 yrs)	218 (30.7)
Missing	8 (1.1)
Total	709 (100.0)
<i>Level of Teaching</i>	
Lower Primary (K- Std3)	229 (32.3)
Upper Primary (Std 4 & 5)	206 (29.1)
Lower Secondary (Forms 1 – 3)	63 (8.9)
Upper Secondary (Forms 4 -6)	192 (27.0)
Missing	19 (2.7)
Total	709 (100.0)

<i>Academic Qualifications</i>	
Master's Degree	81 (11.8)
Bachelor's Degree	377 (53.2)
Teachers' Diploma	157 (22.1)
Diploma in Education	19 (2.7)
Technician's Diploma	20 (2.8)
CXC/Advanced Level Certificate	49 (6.9)
Other	2 (.3)
Missing	1 (.1)
Total	709 (100.0)

Frequency analyses were used to account for the reasons why male teachers chose to remain in highly feminized teaching profession. These reasons were addressed in Table 2 below.

Table 2. Survey Items and Participants' Responses

Survey Items	Participants' Responses
I still have a passion for teaching.	Of the 709 respondents, 94% (n=666) indicated agreement while only 6% (n=43) disagreed.
I lack the skills for a competitive job market.	The majority of the respondents 86% (n=610) disagreed indicating that they do have the skills for a competitive job market while only 14% (n=99) felt that do not have the requisite skills to compete in the job market.
I see myself as an important role model for young boys.	96% (n=680) of the participants believe that they are important role models for young boys, while only 4% (n=29) disagreed.
The job is convenient in terms of working hours and holidays.	Of the 709 respondents, 86% (n=610) indicated agreement while 14% (n=99) disagreed.
I am able to do other part-time jobs.	49% (n=354) of the respondents agreed, while 51% (n=355) disagreed that the reason for staying in the teaching profession was because of the opportunity to do other part-time jobs.

Research Question 2 asked: Does a relationship exist among factors such as teaching experience, qualifications, level of teaching and the decision to remain in the teaching service? In order to explore such relationships among the factors in the study, the data were subjected to Spearman's rho correlation since the variables were ordinal and categorical. The Spearman's rho correlation sought to identify relations among demographic factors such as teaching experience, qualifications, and the level of teaching with various reasons for remaining in teaching such as passion for teaching, lack of skills for a competitive job market, role model for young boys, job convenience in terms of working hours and holidays, and the opportunity to pursue other part-time jobs.

Results of the Spearman's rho correlation revealed that there was a negative correlation between qualifications and the opportunity to pursue other part-time jobs. This suggests that the less qualifications an individual possessed, the more likely he would pursue opportunities for other part-time jobs to supplement his income while remaining in the profession. However, the results also showed that level of teaching was positively correlated to participants' perception of teaching as a convenient job in terms of working hours and holidays as well as their desire to seek opportunities for other part-time jobs. This means that teachers with lesser qualifications are more likely to remain in teaching because of convenient working hours and the prospect of engaging in other part-time jobs.

Analysis of the data revealed that there was a positive correlation between an individual's passion for the job and his perception of himself as an important role model for your boys in the classroom. Results also showed that there were positive correlations between participants' view of themselves as important role models and their decision to stay in teaching because of job convenience.

Table 3. Correlations Among Demographic Factors and Reasons for Remaining in Teaching

	Passion for the Job	Lack Skills	Role Model	Job Convenience	Other Part-time Jobs
Teaching Experience	-.012	-.026	.019	.022	.063
Qualifications	.014	.045	-.055	-.027	-.113**
Teaching Level	.056	-.051	-.038	.097*	.167**
Passion for the Job	_____	.000	.364**	.042	.045
Lack Skills		_____	.062	.046	.053
Role Model			_____	.125**	.040
Job Convenience				_____	.269**
Other Part-time Jobs					_____

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

* . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Summary of Focus Group Findings

Two focus group sessions were conducted to probe deeper into the reasons why men choose to stay in a profession that is predominantly female. Each focus group comprised six participants who provided responses to the following three questions:

- Why do you choose to teach when other men opt to leave the profession?
- How do you feel about choosing a career that has become a predominantly feminized profession?
- What can male teachers do to support each other in the profession?

Three major themes emerged from focus group discussions: (a) making a difference especially to male students; and (b) maintaining confidence in a highly feminized environment; (c) garnering support for male teachers in the system.

Making a difference to male students

Findings from the first question revealed that male teachers chose to remain in teaching to make a difference particularly to male students. They felt that one way to do so was to become a positive role model to boys who live in households without a father figure to provide the guidance they need. Driven by a passion for teaching, respondents believed that they could fill the gap in the classroom. One participant stated that becoming a teacher provided him a better opportunity to influence young boys at risk rather than engaging in volunteer work in the community which he did with little apparent success. He said: "I decided that probably if I enter the teaching service I would have been able to make a change there. So that was my motivation to join the teaching service."

Other respondents agreed that young boys in the classroom often look to them for guidance. One participant concluded that "male teachers in the school definitely have an impact on the children and more so the discipline in the school." All participants were unanimous in their

view that providing a positive role model makes a difference in the lives of the young boys they teach.

Maintaining confidence in a highly feminized environment

While teaching is sometimes labeled as women's work in the literature, participants in this study were not daunted by stereotypes imposed on men who choose to teach. As a matter fact, the majority of respondents felt quite comfortable working among women who, as one participant puts it, "generally embrace males in the school." He recalled his experience as a novice teacher in a predominantly female-led school: "most of the female teachers welcomed us with warm arms because you know, we think differently and bring different vibes..." Another respondent added: "in the school where I teach, I am basically the king there because I am the only male among all those females."

Although most of the participants described their treatment as "excellent among the female teachers," one respondent had a different story to tell. For him, the idea of teaching in a female-dominated environment was somewhat challenging since as the only male teacher on staff, he was expected to perform all the menial tasks including "moving the cupboards, fixing the chairs, and other types of hard work." He felt intimidated by those female teachers who asserted their authority and lauded their seniority over him. Despite this one case, the majority of male teachers felt comfortable working among women teachers who operated in a non-threatening teaching environment.

Garnering support for male teachers

Notwithstanding the level of confidence male teachers generally feel about working in a feminized environment, all respondents agreed on the need for greater male support in the teaching service. One participant believed that sports and other forms of recreational activities provide an excellent opportunity for team building and male bonding in cluster schools where women outnumber male teachers. He stated that "cohesion among the men drives them to want to continue to teach in schools."

Another participant suggested that a formal organization should be established to facilitate a wider spread of male teachers throughout the entire teaching fraternity in the country. In this forum, men could freely discuss issues that affect them in the classroom and exchange ideas about best practices in terms of pedagogy and use of resources to facilitate student learning. According to one respondent, "the Ministry of Education should play a leading role in organizing workshops for male teachers." He further argued that this initiative will go a long way on the part of the Ministry of Education in "showing the male teachers how important they are."

Extending the argument further, one participant saw the need for conferences specifically designed to bring together all male teachers in the wider Caribbean region. Other participants believed that male teachers can also garner support through leadership and mentorship programmes. In this way "males can feel empowered to move forward in the profession ...". They all concluded that "the Ministry of Education needs to make the job more attractive to keep promising male teachers in the classroom."

DISCUSSION

This study sought to answer three main questions: (1) What are the pull factors that keep men in the Trinidad and Tobago teaching profession? (2) Does a relationship exist among factors such as teaching experience, qualifications, level of teaching and the decision to remain in the

teaching profession? (3) How do male teachers perceive their role regarding the boys they teach in the classroom?

Participants of the study identified several pull factors which keep them in a profession largely dominated by women. These include a passion for teaching; making a difference by becoming a positive role model for young boys; convenient working hours and holidays; and the opportunity to pursue other part-time jobs. Careful analysis of these reasons revealed that the idea of becoming a positive role model is perhaps the strongest pull factor responsible for keeping men in the classroom. Of the 709 participants who responded to the questionnaire, 96% (n=680) believed that they are important role models for boys. A similar response came from focus group discussions where the majority of respondents believed that they could make a difference by becoming positive role models particularly to boys who live in households without a father figure to provide guidance.

The question of the male teacher as a positive role model has been corroborated by earlier studies (Davison & Nelson, 2011; Allan, 1994; Priegert Coulter & McNay, 1993; Montecinos & Nielson, 1997; Thornton, 1999). Still, this issue has been hotly debated by other writers who challenge the merits of the male role model argument (Sketton, 2003; Gold & Reis, 1982). However, this study showed that the idea of male teachers providing positive role models is worthy of consideration given our Caribbean context. Like other territories, Trinidad and Tobago has a large percentage of absentee fathers; and some single mothers often face an enormous challenge of steering their sons away from the burgeoning gang influence that exists in some of the communities. In these circumstances, the prospect of male teachers modeling positive behaviours should be encouraged. The fact that the majority of male teachers consider this as their role provides hope for those students who are likely to be at risk without the intervention of the male classroom teacher.

Despite stereotypes which hold that teaching is women's work, participants of this study felt secure in their ability to function optimally in a highly feminized environment. This level of confidence came not only from a strong sense of self, but also from a passion for teaching as well as a keen sense of responsibility to young boys in need of mentorship. Focus group discussions revealed that the majority of men experienced positive interactions with their female counterparts who appreciated the different approach and perspective they brought to the job. The study also showed that 94% (n=666) of the respondents regarded their passion for teaching as an important pull factor that keeps them in the teaching profession. Results of the Spearman's rho correlation also showed a positive association between an individual's passion for the job and his perception of himself as a role model for boys in the classroom. Whether or not this perception is accurate can be further explored, perhaps, in other studies on male teachers in Caribbean classrooms.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

This research was an extension of an earlier study on male attrition which sought to examine key factors responsible for pushing men out of the classroom (Joseph & Jackman, 2014). Investigation into the question of why men choose to work in a female dominated teaching profession also provides useful insights into what motivates men to remain in the classroom and what strategies they employ to survive a highly feminized profession.

The notion of providing positive role models for young boys seems to be the primary motivation for the majority of men in the study. While this finding has been substantiated by earlier studies, other writers have consistently challenged the veracity of such an argument

pointing instead to what they consider to be more complex matters of gender raised by feminism and the sociology of men and masculinities. Notwithstanding, this study is important because it extends the discourse on male role models to a different Caribbean context.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- There is need for further investigation into what constitutes a positive role model for young boys and whether there is a relationship between positive role modeling and improvement in academic achievements among boys in the Caribbean classroom.
- Given the existing shortage of men in the teaching profession, the Trinidad and Tobago Ministry of Education should give consideration to the idea of offering incentives for male teachers to remain in the classroom. Suggestions made by participants of the study regarding workshops and conferences specifically designed for male teachers may provide a good platform for starting such a conversation.
- Findings from this study should encourage further probe into the merits of the male role model argument from a Caribbean perspective.

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