Boys who dare don’t care: unwanted men, the performing arts and perplexing disruptions to the male teacher discourse.

Martin Ashley

Abstract

The question of boys’ achievement and behaviour has occupied a dominant position in the discourses of schooling and teacher education for the last two decades. A commonly expressed view is that schools have become “feminised” and that more male teachers are needed as “role models” in order to solve a supposed “problem with boys”. Previous work by the author concluded that primary school boys were commonly content with their female teachers and did not generally share the anxiety of government or the Training and Development Agency for schools (TDA) to recruit more male teachers. The present paper thus seeks to explore further the question of whether there are any differences in boys’ perceptions of male teachers as role models for boys’ participation in “feminised” areas of the curriculum. It draws on data from three funded projects by the author in which boys’ participation in the arts has been closely observed. There is little evidence that boys’ participation in the performing arts is enhanced by the presence of male teachers acting as role models. Indeed, it emerges as even more robustly the case that boys do not seem to require male teachers in the urgent way suggested by TDA recruitment rhetoric. Whilst there might be agreement that it is desirable to include male teachers to model the adult workforce, even if they do not improve boys’ performance, the evidence of this study presents the disturbing possibility that male teachers may actually in certain circumstances have a counterproductive or negative effect on boys’ participation.

Introduction

The question of boys’ achievement and behaviour has occupied a dominant position in the discourses of schooling and teacher education for the last two decades. A commonly expressed view is that schools have become “feminised” and that more male teachers are needed as “role models” in order to solve a supposed “problem with boys”. It might be imagined that after two decade’s intense scrutiny and debate, some resolution and closure to this particular argument might be in sight, but this appears not to be the case. In spite of near continuous campaigning to attract male recruits, the gender imbalance within the teaching profession retains a stubborn inertia and calls for more male teachers continue to be heard. A scholarly consensus regarding the problem remains in a state of tension with a popular “common sense” view, often associated with a right wing discourse of recuperative masculinity politics. The former suggests that men make little difference to boys’ education and, though desirable in principle, can sometimes make matters worse (Cushman, 2008). The latter takes it for granted that boys cannot learn to be men without men and concludes from this that boys will continue to underachieve and misbehave until there are more men teachers (see Mills et al, 2007 for an explanation and critique).

It is possible that the “common sense” view appeals also to the attractively simple theory of sex-role initiation through social learning theory (Bandura, 1963). According to this, it is
sufficient simply to match boys to men. The literature on schools and classrooms is replete with critical deconstructions of this position. Cushman (2008) or Zyngier (2009) are recent examples. Riggs (2008) has powerfully shown how such assumptions extend beyond the classroom in his critique of popular books that purport to demonstrate how to father successful boys. Hutchings et al (2007) deal with the more specific question of role models. This paper draws on these writings and other similar literature before reporting on three studies that have investigated the “boys who dare”. By this is meant boys who participate in areas of the curriculum such as singing and dance, a transgression according to the “rules” of hegemonic masculinity. Do the same arguments about role models hold good here, or are “men” (any man will do for the present) urgently needed to give boys the strength to dare to resist hegemonic masculinity?

Who are the “boys who dare”?

Skelton et al (2009) are amongst the many scholarly writers who feel obliged patiently to reiterate the need not to homogenise “all boys” or “all girls”, as continues to be done when the solutions to boys’ alleged problems are based mainly upon the “common sense” approach. The category “boys who dare” is clearly a sub-category of “all boys” (and doubtless there could be a similar category of “girls who dare”) so what is the intended meaning in this paper? Fundamentally, we might look to Connell’s notion of resistance to hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 2005, 2008). The boys who dare include those who are bold enough to resist the proscription of “feminine” and therefore “subordinate” activities such as singing or dancing. Billy Elliott might therefore be a popular folk representation of a boy who dares. He is a boy who dares to resist all that the hegemonic masculinity of white working class and traditional heavy industry can throw at him.

In the world of classroom observation, things are rarely as simple and clear cut. As Graham (2003) describes, the phenomenon of the single (six year old) boy in the ballet class is known, and there are other stories in the literature of boys and dance that appear to confirm that a passion for the activity is associated with daring to resist (Gard, 2008). Similar stories have emerged in my own work on boys and singing (Ashley, 2009a). Analysis of all these stories has revealed little in the way of explanatory factors in traditional markers of identity such as social class, age, ethnicity, religion or geographical location. There are stories in my own work of white, middle class boys who resist apparently through their high cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986). Equally, there are stories of working class black boys who resist apparently through their exposure to evangelical religion. Almost any combination of cultural identity markers is possible in the resistance stories of hegemonic masculinity. The boys who dare cannot be characterised by membership of any particular social class, ethnicity or attainment level.

It would be wrong also to conceive of this resistance as invariably an exceptional case or individual eccentricity. It can be found at individual level. Equally it can be found at the level of small or large groups and even, in some cases as we shall shortly see, at the level of whole schools that resist hegemonic patterns. It would also be particularly wrong to conceive of resistance purely in terms of power binaries rooted in the social construction of gender. Encouragingly, Ellis (2008) has recently drawn attention to the possibility that Connell’s pro-feminist stance has led her to over-estimate the role of gender construction in power relations. This has been liberating for my own work which has had to cope with power relations related to other cultural markers, of which generational identity has been particularly significant.
A factor that does seem common to all cases appears to be the strength of identity that is associated with the activity. Boys who dare are boys who dare to have something more in their lives than Mac-an-Ghaill’s 3Fs (fightin’ fuckin and football, Mac-an Ghaill, 1994) and care little about their non-conformity to this limiting image. If this quality cannot be isolated to any particular power relationship or cultural identity marker, the task is to investigate further whether there is a variable over which some influence might be had in the educational process. And so we turn to the teacher as role model.

What is a “Role Model”?

The “common sense” view described earlier continues to demand more male teachers, not because the presence of male classroom teachers (as opposed to heads) can demonstrate an aspiration for sexual equality in the workplace, but because it is insisted that there is a “problem with boys” and that the “obvious” way to solve this is to fill schools with male teachers who will be “role models” as suggested by social learning theory (Bandura, 1963). The naivety of the necessary assumption that “all boys” and “all men” are the same is breathtaking, to say nothing of the obvious impossibility of ever achieving boys’ access to men teachers fairly and consistently when the proportion of male primary teachers has fluctuated stubbornly within the 15 – 20% range over many decades. A strong, evidence based critique of the general position in classrooms is provided by authors such as Titus (2004), Mills et al (2007) or Skelton (2009).

It is important to appreciate that there is nothing in this scholarly consensus that objects in principle to the recruitment of men to teaching. Few if any authors are saying that the gender imbalance in teaching is an issue that should be ignored. What concerns us more specifically here is the surprising fact that whilst Skelton (2001, 2002) at the beginning of the present decade drew attention to the obvious question “what kind of men?” researchers such as Cushman (2008) or Haase (2008) feel it necessary at the end of the decade to point out the continued and surprising lack of attention to this obvious question. The implication seems to be that there may exist in some quarters a form of despair in which “any man will do” – a potential source of distress to those male primary teachers who genuinely believe they have been recruited on merit rather positive discrimination toward their sex (Foster & Newman, 2005). It is clearly not the case that “any man will do” because whenever researchers have looked at whether or not any significant improvement in boys’ attitudes and achievements can be reliably attributed to male teachers, the conclusion has invariably been that they cannot (Hopf & Hatzichristou, 1999; Burn, 2002; Ashley & Lee, 2003; Sokal et al, 2005; Drudy et al, 2005; Carrington et al, 2005; Martin & Marsh, 2005; Thornton & Bricheno, 2006; Carrington et al, 2008; Holmlund & Sund, 2008, Skelton et al, 2009).

When it comes to broadening boys’ horizons through the performing arts and activities such as singing or dancing, it is quite possible that the wrong kind of man simply will not do and may be counterproductive. This question was addressed as long ago as 1996 by Salisbury & Jackson when they described the need at the time of the introduction of dance to the National Curriculum, to “re-educate the conventional, manly values and assumptions of many male PE teachers” (Salisbury & Jackson, 1996: 212). The degree to which such men and associated macho management styles in teaching undermine women was established in the classic study of Askew & Ross (1988). A related study by Lee et al (1994) demonstrated that such attitudes were harmful to pupils also, a fact that appears to be confirmed in the more recent work of Francis & Skelton (2001) and in the specific case of boys and music by Button.
(2006). Skelton’s (2001) study, furthermore, confirms just how easy it is for apparently benign male primary teachers to harm the opportunities for boys to expand their cultural horizons. It may be that any failure of boys to engage with the broader curriculum is more likely to be associated with curriculum content and pedagogy, irrespective of teacher gender. It is this possibility that drives the present enquiry.

The “common sense” view of role models would presumably posit that if a male teacher promotes gender atypical activity such as dance or singing, boys will be more likely to engage. Bricheno & Thornton (2007) demonstrate that children do not see their teachers as role models as imagined by this “common sense” view. These authors found that a “role model” is seen as a “kind, loving person” who “helps when needed”. Family members were significantly the most frequently cited (Thornton & Bricheno, 2006: 10). This is confirmed by Hutchins et al (2007) whose study also supports the findings of the author’s own earlier enquiry (Ashley & Lee, 2003). This found that boys’ views appear to be that the job of the teacher is to teach well, not to be a substitute family member. “Because teachers aren’t family and there’s no way they could really do what families do”. (2003: 100). My own current study has revealed that there may be significant confusion in the minds of male NQTs on this issue. During a TDA funded filmed interview with three male NQTs the term “role model for boys” was used by all three NQTs when asked to describe what they might bring to teaching. When asked later in the interview to suggest who they thought boys would nominate as role models, the same NQTs suggested neither themselves nor sports stars but mothers or older family members – exactly the response given by the majority of boys in the earlier studies. This important matter is currently under further investigation.

Other work on boyhood identities such as that of Walker & Kushner (1999), Frosh et al (2002) or Mechling (2008) does point to the strong possibility that boys respond to intermediary role models closer to their own age. A previous discussion by the author (Ashley, 2003) offered an explanation of role modelling through attachment theory (Bowlby, 2005). Children do not, according to this, generally form attachments to teachers. They are more likely to imitate attributes of those to whom they do have attachments, in other words, the close family members found by Thornton & Bricheno (op. cit.) and, for boys, the “fratriarchy” or community of older brothers found by Mechling (op. cit.) Skelton et al (2009) take all this work a step further forward by clarifying that 7 – 8 year old pupils (said to be at an age particularly concerned with gender identification) were not interested in or invested in the gender of their teachers, but did manifest considerable concern with their own gender identities. They interpret their findings through post-structuralism which, they suggest, allows us to view pluralities of identity obscured by earlier sex-role socialisation theories. Such approaches, I will soon demonstrate, are necessary to understand the “boys who dare”.

It is unlikely, then, that lasting damage is done or lasting benefits accrue through boys actually aspiring to be like their teachers. Most of the boys in my own research have been explicit about how they do not want to be like teachers because few of them want to be teachers. Skelton et al (2009) found the same in that the main reason children gave them for wanting to emulate their teachers was because they wanted to be teachers themselves. This is a literal definition of role modelling that appears to make more sense to children who can be articulate about their “ideal heroes” (usually sports personalities for boys). Most boys are quite capable of distinguishing between the football star they pretend to be during play and the real person (usually their mother) to whom they look for emotional support and moral
guidance (Biskup & Pfister, 1999). Teachers do not appear to fulfil either need to the extent that is imagined by “common sense”.

In summary, it has never been entirely clear what “common sense” and sex-role learning literature have really meant by role modelling, though the implication seems to be that the male teacher role model will be a person attractive to boys (simply by virtue of the shared biological sex) who will thus want to imitate all his behaviours. Are we really to assume that this amounts to anything as naïve as the belief that if this man reads books, enjoys maths and is polite (qualities which teachers of any gender disposition are presumably required to demonstrate), boys will read books, enjoy maths and be polite too, when they would not do so for a woman teacher? I now move to consider this question further through evidence about how the “boys who dare” engage with singing and dancing.

The Research Questions

The “common sense” view reasserts itself when gendered areas of the curriculum are considered. Thus a view I commonly encountered in researching boys’ participation in dance and singing was that “male role models, male teachers, male dancers or male conductors” would be necessary to increase boys’ participation. Sex-role initiation through social learning theory would support this, but the emergent picture was that it was not supported empirically, either by observation or by interviews with boys. This apparent conflict between “common sense” and what appeared to be empirical evidence has been formalised as the following research questions:

- Does the finding that 9 – 14 year old boys perceive teacher gender as a peripheral issue in core subjects apply also to subjects such as the performing arts?

- Is the belief that male role models are necessary to support boys’ participation in the performing arts substantiated by evidence?

Methodology

This paper collates and compares the qualitative data from three studies in which boys or young men who qualify as “boys who dare” have made comments that can be subsequently coded as role model referenced. It is grounded in the substantial literature of critical masculinity studies in school exemplified by writers such as Martino (2003) or Mac-an-Ghaill & Haywood (2006) and takes a sceptical view of Connell’s pro-feminist emphasis (Connell, 2005) on the primacy of gender in power relations (Ellis, 2008). Study one consisted of twelve detailed case studies of boy vocalists (aged between 11 and 14) and the response to their work of approximately 600 children of similar age in seventeen different schools, purposively sampled across England, Wales and the Isle of Man according to the variable of boys’ participation in singing across schools with intakes differing according to social class, ethnic mix and urban/rural location. It is reported in detail elsewhere (Ashley, 2008a, 2008b, 2009a).

Study two was a retrospective study of ten young men (mean age 25) who reflected on their time in school as members of a boys’ dance group. Sampling on this occasion was
 opportunistic as the study was a report of a highly unusual if not unique example of white working class boys’ participation in an activity theoretically proscribed by working class constructions of masculinity (Arts Council, 2003). This study is more fully reported in Ashley (2009b). Study three is a follow on to study one. It consists of further observations of and interviews with boys participating in the filming of a research council funded multi-media knowledge transfer resource on boys’ singing. It has generated large amounts of material filmed by a professional production company in which boys give “vox pop” interviews, targeted at school peers, about their participation in singing. These settings have been deemed “naturalistic” in that the boys have been filmed during activities they normally participate in. Comparison of the nature and content of these interviews with those given to a researcher under more conventional conditions, but deemed naturalistic by virtue of their location, is proving to be highly instructive and the subject of a future detailed study.

The naturalistic mode of enquiry (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Bowen, 2008) has been an aim of all three studies, as has been an iterative approach in which boys’ or young men’s story telling is linked to observational evidence and shared theorising between researcher and interviewees (Alderson, 2003; Woodhead & Faulkner, 2000). The concept of “naturally occurring evidence”, describes the attempt to capture what is “out there” without preconceptions or determining structures held by the researcher. Such evidence is easily corrupted as when, for example, a researcher has to supply additional information to an interviewee in order to progress the interview. Such interventions should be kept to a minimum. The studies thus attempt describe the situations as boys and young men see them and employ humanistic phenomenological approaches to the elicitation and interpretation of interview narrative (Smith & Osborn, 2003; Kendler, 2005). Study three is ongoing at the time of writing and includes the facility to gather large scale quantitative data on teacher gender and boys’ participation in singing, though these are not yet available.

Results

There is an imbalance in the amount of data available on dancing and singing that is a consequence of significant differentials in the scope and funding levels of the three studies. Only one case study of dance is reported, whereas fifteen case studies of singing were available. The aim of the present analysis, it will be recalled, is primarily to examine the role of teacher gender in boys’ willingness to transgress traditional gender boundaries, then to explore the degree to which the boys explicitly acknowledge the teacher as a role model. In the case of study two (dance), it is a given that the teacher gender is male. For studies one and three, teacher gender was a variable. Table I below analyses the relationship between teacher gender and boys’ willingness to resist hegemonic masculinity by crossing gendered boundaries in the schools where singing was studied. The column headed respectively lessons and choir refer to whether or not boys’ actual participation in singing was an acknowledged feature of the school because (a) boys willingly sang during KS3 class music lessons and (b) attended a choir or singing activity on a voluntary basis. Where the answer to question (b) was negative, either no such activity existed or fewer than 10% of possible members were boys. Where the answer to question (a) was negative, class singing during KS3 was weak or non-existent, a feature significantly criticised by the UK schools inspectorate in a review of music education (OFSTED, 2009).
Table I

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School No.</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Lessons</th>
<th>Choir</th>
<th>HoD</th>
<th>Gender</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Town performing arts comprehensive, NW</td>
<td>Some</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>City music specialist comprehensive, SE</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Inner city-comprehensive, SW</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Rural performing arts comprehensive, SW</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Town comprehensive, Wales</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Town comprehensive, Isle of Man</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>City performing arts comprehensive, SW</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Choir school (independent), SE</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Choir School (independent), SE</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Choir School, (independent) SW</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Choir &amp; Music school (independent) NW</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Boys’ grammar school (maths and science), SE</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>South London comprehensive</td>
<td>Some</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Rural business studies comprehensive, NW</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Inner city comprehensive, SE</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Co-educational HMC Public School, SE</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Sport comprehensive, Midlands</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It will be seen that schools 8, 9, 10, 11 and 16 are all strong on boys’ singing and, for the most part, have male heads of department. However, they are also independent schools and, as I have discussed in a previous paper, there is a significant difference between maintained and independent schools in the UK with regard to music provision which has considerable bearing on boys’ participation (Ashley, 2002; see also Harrison, 2009). These schools are discounted from the present analysis as it is likely to be the relative importance attached to boys’ participation in singing by the two sectors that is the over-riding variable.

In the remaining schools, out of all the possible instances of boys’ participation, 12% were associated with male heads of department and 33% with female. This is out of an overall gender balance within the sample of 42% male heads of department and 58% female. These figures are too small for meaningful statistical treatment or integration into national data on the genders of secondary music teachers. However, such data should be available at a later date when schools register to use the resource produced by the project. For the present, it is possible to see a pattern that demonstrates either that gender has very little effect, or that it has a positive effect in favour of female teachers. There is certainly no evidence in this table alone to support the “common sense” view and statistically significant illustration of national patterns, when it is available, will be very instructive. I now draw on each of the studies to present naturalistic qualitative data which illuminate the degree to which boys or young men appear conscious of the influence of a teacher in the position of “role model”, and whether gender is recognised as a relevant factor.
Study One

The final selection of schools from which to draw data illustrates the degree to which each case is unique and the interpretative gulf that must exist between a detailed case study and a quantitative trend. School 17 is now also discounted because, although the head of department was female, the school was involved in a reality television series in which a young male conductor was brought in to introduce singing in a school where, allegedly, “boys don’t sing”. This was, according to the school’s head of music, an inaccurate representation by the programme makers because the school did have singing and did already have a boys’ choir. The school applied to take part in the TV series because the head of department saw this as a means of boosting numbers in the boys’ choir she already had, a decision she came later to regret on account of her treatment by the media (Ashley, 2009). School 12 is discounted because it was a single sex, selective school and has been the subject of a report elsewhere (Ashley, 2008c). This report commented on the significant effect on the boys of an absence of girls. This appeared to be positive in that boys were much less inhibited about their singing, but negative in that some quite misogynist attitudes surfaced. Whether or not the gender of the teacher was significant is only anecdotal. Observations appeared to suggest that she was both well liked and well able to take in her stride relationships that included, for example, a Y11 boy’s risqué flirtatious comment.

This leaves schools 1 and 2 which are both comprehensives. School 1 had a music specialism, school 2 a performing arts specialism. In both schools, things had developed “naturally” through the work of the teachers before contact with the research project. School 1 had a female head of department and school 2 a male head. Of the two, School 1 had significantly the greater number of boys participating – over one hundred were members of the boys’ choir, singing was a regular feature of KS3 lessons and also featured significantly in the school’s outreach to primary schools. The boys were confident that this was because they had good teachers. When the whole choir was asked why other schools didn’t have similar choirs, the range of responses included:

    Other schools aren’t cool

    We’ve got great teachers. (There is much assent to this answer).

    Yeah, other schools don’t have staff like we do.

Interestingly, a comment about the teacher’s boldness, confidence and belief was offered that contrasts with the macho male teachers’ fear of boys and dance reported by Salisbury & Jackson (1996).

    In other schools, teachers are scared in case they do it and no boys come.

Although the boys clearly held their teacher in high regard, no comments were offered about gender. However, the departmental secretary felt I should know something:

    Do you know why there are so many boys in the choir? Every one of them is in love with Andrea.

Nevertheless, boys’ solidarity rather than the teacher as role model was the most common coding at school 1 in responses given by the boys themselves. The coding of the fratriarchy or older boys as role models was also frequent:
As soon as some start coming more join because they can see there’s nothing wrong with it.

Well, we all look up to Y11. I used to be really in awe of them when I first came to this school (Y8 boy).

In school 2, a strategy called “Not for Girls” had been adopted to encourage boys’ participation. Whether this is really necessary is debatable. The boys did not appear to demonstrate any of the misogyny observed in school 12 but unlike that school, school 2 was co-educational. In both schools 1 and 2, there were boy only choirs but equivalent opportunities were offered to girls. Both schools also offered the opportunity for mixed sex as well as single sex singing. The boys in school 2 were positive about their participation and the coding of boys’ solidarity is again the most frequent. For example:

If people are unsure whether to come, they might think it’s not cool, but it is really, because it’s a bunch of lads together

Only one “naturally occurring” comment explicitly acknowledged the role of the teacher. It was appreciative and referred not to gender but, as with School 1, to competence at the job:

Mr Kirdale chooses all our songs, like a true professional!

In this interview, three Y9 boys are asked to say what attracts them to the NFG choir and what might be attractive to new Y7s joining the school:

B1: It’s fun to be with your friends, and to relax with them
B2: It’s upbeat, it’s not choiry songs that sound like church
B3: He treats us like men, he sort of respects us.
B2: And there’s not too many girls. We like girls but too many girls no, that’d put Y7 off.

Though invited to give perhaps five top reasons, the boys do not mention anything specifically about the teacher or his gender, other than that he respects them and “treats them like men”. This would seem to imply a good relationship and understanding of fourteen year old boys’ needs. In the absence of volunteered “naturally occurring” comments about role models, I then put the specific question.

MA: Are role models important in getting you to come? What is a role model?
B2: A role model is somebody you want to be like, somebody you’d look up to and be the same as them.
MA: Are teachers role models?
B3: They can be. If you like their subject. Mr Kirdale’s a good role model.

It is clear that the teacher is liked and respected by the boys, but there is little evidence to suggest that this is specifically because he is a man. It is rather that he is competent at his job, both in terms of subject knowledge and his understanding of boys. The comment “if you like their subject” is telling here. The teacher is modelling, not maleness, but enjoyment of the subject and boys might look up to somebody who has the qualities necessary to make a subject they enjoy “relaxing” and “fun”.
**Study Two**

The young men in study two explicitly acknowledged that they had been boys who dared. As with the boys who sang, the solidarity of their mates had contributed to this.

It was a really good five years at Hartcliffe. I was in a good year group.

If you’re strong enough to do dance against the grain, you’re strong enough to put up with the shit. Others would.

A huge camaraderie came out of it. Not necessarily just the people we performed with.

However, unlike studies one or three, it became clear during study two that the young men recognised that the teacher who had championed their dance had been hugely influential on their lives. Even now, some twelve years later, Vic was clearly held in esteem by the young men. The issue appeared to be his conviction that working class boys should be empowered to make cultural choices in their lives. According to Vic:

We don’t teach Mozart to prevent shoplifting. We teach him because he’s one step below God.

According to the young men during the first focus group:

R1: Oh Yeah. More than choice. He gave us the opportunity to go out and do stuff, to express ourselves. We had guidance.
R2: It made us better people.
R3: We’re all better people for doin’ it.
R1: He gave us confidence and room.
R4: We could have jus’ gone to school, kicked a football around and beat people up. He gave us something different.

The same theme occurred again during the second focus group. The young men had been talking about the fact that it was Billy Elliot’s *passion* for his dance that gave him the strength to dare. They brought up the fact that teachers too had to have passion for their pupils if they were to overcome educational disadvantage. Once again, Vic appeared to be idolised above merely mortal teachers:

R1: You’ve got to have someone with the passion
R2: It doesn’t have to be Vic
R3: That question goes into the recruitment of teachers
R1: They don’t put ‘how much passion?’ on the application form.
R4: They don’t ask the question on a form, ‘how does it *feel* to teach?’
R1: All of a sudden, I saw Vic as a great mentor and leader. You don’t often get that in a teacher.
R4: This is why we haven’t got anyone in schools. What would you call your job? (to Vic, the teacher)
Teacher: It’s a weak statement, but I felt it was part of my job to help you grow up.
R5: My opinion is that that is not a weak statement.
R3: You cannot get someone who’s a follower to lead and teach PE.
R1: We learned to create our own sense of passion

The description of Vic as a “great mentor and leader” appears to resonate with populist writer Stephen Biddulph’s claim that “…a community made up only of the peer group isn’t enough … we need those really great school teachers ... so that there is someone special for every kid” (Biddulph, 1997: 29). Does this “really great teacher” have to be male (as is perhaps
implied)? Pushing the boundaries of naturally occurring evidence, I put this to the young men at our last meeting:

So if it doesn’t have to be Vic, who could it be? Could it be a woman, for example?

Why not?

All but one of the seven present felt that Vic, their great mentor, could equally well have been female.

Study Three

The methodological process of engaging with naturally occurring evidence and sharing theorising with interviewees is one that invites the interviewee to accompany the researcher on the journey from the “common sense” to the counter-intuitive that is so often revealed by scientific enquiry. These final examples from case three have been chosen because they reveal more of that process, seen also above. “Role model” is such an “obvious” concept, yet it is clearly less familiar to the boys themselves who are encouraged by the adult interviewer to think it through. This evidence was gathered from one of the “naturalistic settings” – a conversation during a break in recording. The conversation took place with a seventeen year old, vox pop style.

Role models. Have you got one?

In what sense?

Any sense, maybe a sense that makes you think I want to be like that?

I don’t know, there’s a couple of singers who I like ...a couple of tenors, just two I’d like to be like

What about parents? Are they role models?

Um (pause) my Mum is. My mum and dad are divorced.

So do you see your dad much? Do you mind me asking?

(Shakes head non-committedly)

But you name your Mum as a role model. Is that because you live with her?

nods

Right.

And in what way is she a role model?

In the way she manages my life and, things, the stuff I do, performance wise and stuff

If you met somebody who said, Oh to get boys interested in singing you have to have their father as a role model, what would you say?

I don’t know, ... I wouldn’t agree with it.

What about teachers as role models?

No. I don’t want to be a teacher.
Later, a similar conversation takes place with thirteen year old Scott and eleven year old Benny. Scott is moved, with the help of his younger peer, to articulate for the first time that his father has been a role model for him:

What happened when you were 7 or 8 that made you think I want to sing?

Well, cos, my Dad had a job at Ripon. He’d been one of the songmen there

Do you know what a role model is?

(Long pause.)

Do you know what a role model is Benny? Help us out here! Join in the conversation and tell us what a role model is.

It’s say, like making a good example to other people, to younger people. Being like, ah, well, erm, like singing, singing to a younger person of your age who likes it.

Right, so a role model is somebody you sort of look up to who’s a bit older. You say I want to be like that. So (to Scott) would you say your dad was a role model?

Probably, yeah.

In this case, a father is a role model, though the boy only comes to acknowledge this as part of the interview process at risk of compromising naturally occurring evidence. There is no evidence, however, to suggest specifically that maleness is important. It is simply that the father does something the boy is interested in and we may reasonably presume that there is also an emotional bond – not to a teacher but to a “close family member” who perhaps “helps when needed”.

Discussion

If there is a common thread to the three studies reported here, it is that certain qualities are needed by teachers if boys are to dare take the risk of engagement in the arts. These qualities appear to be in the main the competence that comes from proficient subject and pedagogical knowledge and the confidence that comes from a belief that boys can, should and will engage with their subjects. Teachers must not be “scared in case no boys come” and to “help boys grow up” is “not a weak statement”. Such boldness, though hardly presenting an association with the weak or the passive, appears to be less a quality of gender than a quality of good teaching. If that is the case, then we may have answers to the research questions.

- The perception of 9 – 14 year old boys that teacher gender is a peripheral issue in core subjects appears to apply also to subjects such as the performing arts.

- The belief that male role models are necessary to support boys’ participation in the performing arts does not appear substantiated by evidence.

However, if boys are to dare to cross gender boundaries, then it may that teaching has to be more than simply “good”. There has been evidence for this. It may be that teaching has to be “passionate”. “Passion” is required both for the subject and for the students that are to learn
Boys who dare
British Educational Research Association, 2009

The young men of the dance challenge us directly here. Our teacher recruitment and development procedures do not ask how it feels to teach or what it means to be a “great mentor and leader”. They merely require the competency of a good technician. It has been clear in this review that, if passion for both subject and student appear to be required, both women and men are capable of it. Is this a realistic aspiration, however? Music and dance education and boys’ singing in particular has always been a postcode lottery and continues to be one (Welch et al, 2009). Perhaps “passion”, if the word is not already a hyperbole, is an exceptional quality. The issue then becomes that if passion is found in only a limited proportion of the teaching force, it may be proportionately found in only a very small number of males, or at least potential male recruits.

Here, then, is a suggestion that the wrong questions are being asked. If boys are not engaging as we would wish, perhaps we should be asking less for more men teachers than for more passionate teachers of either gender. We should be examining whether “passion”, or something like it, can be more a part of the way we develop teachers. It may be that there are parallels to be drawn between the boys who dare to dance or sing and the men who dare – to become primary or KS1 teachers or to challenge macho stereotypes in a secondary school. The time may have come to lay down arms on the gender question and, as Zyngier (2009) suggests write “not another book on boys and their achievement” – but for one thing. As Skelton and her colleagues point out, children are relatively unconcerned about the gender of their teachers, but do appear to be greatly concerned about the development of their own gender identities, particularly at the beginning of KS2 (Skelton et al, op. cit.). If there are no teachers with the passion to encourage boys across constructed and culturally limiting gender boundaries, boys will continue to believe that there are whole areas of the curriculum, including singing and dance, that it is not proper for them to engage with. Will boys who believe that being male is about eschewing anything other than sport be the next generation to believe that merely being a male adult is all that is needed to address issues in boys’ education?

Conclusion

There has been evidence in this review that boys and the men who teach them are on the one hand confused by the concept of “role model” yet, on the other hand fully capable of reflecting on it and progressing fairly rapidly beyond the limits of the “common sense” view. Teacher educators should not be complicit in processes that generate the belief that “any man will do”. Any review of the literature readily demonstrates that few are. However, this review presents a case, not for finally closing the book on the “problem with boys” but for a new chapter on the ordinary and the exceptional in boys’ education. Whilst many academic journal articles exist on the subject, it is hardly right that there are members of the teaching profession who have not yet progressed beyond the “common sense” view of gender and role modelling. Moreover, moral panics about male recruitment open the possibility that “the wrong sorts of boy” might grow up to become teachers. Such a threat might see a few more papers yet published on boys’ education and men teachers.
References


Riggs, D. (2008) All the boys are straight, Men and Masculinities, 8(4), 493-517.


Zyngier, D. (2009) Doing it to (for) boys (again): do we really need more books telling us there is a problem with boys' underachievement in education? *Gender and Education*, 21(1), 111-118.