

## “I Just Love Kids . . . Is That a Problem?” Desire, Suspicion, and Other Good Reasons Men Don’t Choose Early Childhood Education

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### Abstract

This essay is a critical response to the ubiquitous call for “more men in elementary education.” The need for more male teachers in elementary grades classrooms is based on a belief that resides uneasily within a tight fist of related wisdom, contradictory understandings, and buried prejudices. The persistent call to teach occludes the culture’s systematic rejection of men for the same job. In order to better understand the value/rejection associated with the mixed message, we examine several perspectives that may influence men in their decisions to reject the call to teach young students. One framework is that of desire or want of teaching and teachers. Another perspective is teaching in early grades construed as gendered women’s work, policed by sexist and pedophilic bullying. In contrast, we offer cultural pedophilia, or child-loving practices that are recovered from popular culture. Women’s desire is examined for ways it is instantiated into desexualized, everyday teaching practice, and the constitutive knot of mothering and early teaching is loosened. Finally, we offer the obverse, “the sexy teacher,” not as a palliative, but as the necessary, logical counterpoint for a mirrored image of what we theorize are the everyday psychological transactions in acts of teaching. We suggest a re-visioning of whom we desire as our children’s teachers.

### Introduction

“We need more men in elementary education.” Many involved in the field of education have encountered this declarative statement of need. Scholarly and pedagogical publications, as well as the popular press, lament the absence of males in

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elementary grades settings. Rich (2014), a national education reporter for the *New York Times*, is among the latest to address the lack of men in the teaching profession. Her reporting rehashes what have become prototypical responses to the question (to quote the article’s headline), “Why Don’t More Men Go Into Teaching?” (n.p.). The answers, according to Rich and others before her, are embedded in issues of pay, prestige, and privilege. In a review of research on the subject, Snyder (2008) similarly concludes, “low status and pay deter males from entering education,” as does the stereotype that teaching is “women’s work” (n.p.). Concerns about the lack of males in the teaching profession are supported by data: according to the latest *Current Population Survey* (conducted annually by the U.S. Department of Labor’s Bureau of Labor Statistics), men account for only 2.8% of preschool and kindergarten teachers and 19.1% of elementary and middle school teachers (2015, n.p.). Rich similarly reports that across kindergarten through twelfth grade, more than three-quarters of American teachers are women and in elementary and middle schools, women comprise more than 80% of teachers in the United States. The clear imbalance in representation of men in early grades settings provides a rationale for the statement of need that opens this essay.

Teaching, however, is a profession laden with ironies and contradictions. Teaching itself, for example, has been construed as a variable profession with niches of expertise (early education, adult education, content education). Because teaching is an activity with many different instantiations, presumably, there is something for everyone. At the same time, teaching has been conversely characterized as a limitless, occupational sponge, able to absorb students defaulting from college majors assumed to be more demanding (hence the patronizing adage that, “those who can’t do, teach”). Conversations about the need for male teachers, too, seem to be paradoxical: while issues related to pay and prestige likely inform men’s decisions not to be elementary teachers, the on-going, repetitive circulation of these reasons/solutions embeds them within collective consciousness as “common sense,” increasingly shutting out the possibility of alternative explanations.

Clearly, the “shortage of men” conundrum is one that has no right or wrong sides; our purpose in writing this essay is not to propose any definitive answers or solutions. Instead, we hope to add complexity to these ongoing debates by examining the issue through an alternative lens. We posit that, because it remains largely unexamined and has evaded critical scrutiny, the notion that “we need more men in elementary education” has become an axiom that circulates endlessly, simultaneously relying upon and reifying rote responses that do not engage with the deeper, sedimented notions of gender, teaching, childhood, and sexuality that are imbricated in decisions not to teach at the elementary level. After all, despite consistent proclamations of desire for men, situating a male body in the role of an early grades teacher simultaneously raises alarm: what kind of man wants to teach young children? Ultimately, the desire for more male teachers in early childhood education is closely coupled with anxieties about male presence in such classrooms.

This paradox (one of many) in early grades teaching, based upon both desire and suspicion, frames the arguments in this paper.

Of course, these arguments are not new. In the 1980s, Seifert (1988a, 1988b) critically examined the call for men in early childhood education. At that time, as remains the case today, he found ambiguity and duplicity in the call. When examined critically, declarations like “we need more men in elementary education” result in ambiguity: while one might presume that these men are needed as teachers, the work to be performed is not specified. Duplicity, for Seifert, is found in the subtle but persistent direction of men away from early childhood education. While women are accepted as inevitable teachers, a man’s decision to teach in the early grades is likely to be interrogated. We wish to examine and analyse the underlying tropes of this conflation of desire and anxiety: why the thought of men teaching in the early grades axiomatically rankles those who consider it, and how we can better understand the desires that subtend the acts of teaching, the care for young children, and the social construction of acts of care as synecdoche for teaching.

In undertaking this project, we invoke and rely upon what Spivak (1993/2009) calls, “strategic essentialism,” the temporary deployment of positivist essentialism as a means of achieving specific political goals. As an example of strategic essentialism in action, one may position themselves in an argument as a “feminist,” while at the same time acknowledging that this particular instantiation of feminism is not intended to represent the whole person using the stance, nor all feminists; rather, it is an identity deployed provisionally and temporarily to achieve a specific goal or accomplish a specific task. While the person taking on the position of “feminist” may view gender as socially constructed and performative, it may be productive (for the sake of understanding) to assume an essentialist position on gender and identity and argue as if each were immutable things. In order to uncover and expose the cultural anxieties around men as elementary school teachers, we purposely (and strategically) deploy binary constructions of both gender and sexual identities throughout our interrogation. Drawing upon “fixed,” often stereotyped, identities and utilizing them as “real” and distinct categories is a strategy that allows us to accomplish specific, political work. We want to be clear that our arguments are not about actual teachers who may or may not match our descriptions; our analyses are of the cultural beliefs that situate possible roles for early grades teachers. Strategic essentialism also allows us, two self-identified males, to write into a space of what is arguably “women’s work,” using a feminist-aligned perspective to argue for men’s rights to work in this same space.

### Male Early Education Teachers and the Fantasy of Desires

Before interrogating some of the factors we believe may undergird men’s decisions not to teach in early grades settings, the *intent to teach* itself deserves expansive attention. A first distinction that must be made is the difference between

others' desires for men *as* teachers, and some men's inherent desire to *be* teachers. The former, the desire of others for men as teachers, is a wish to fill a lack: that there are few men in elementary education is the lack, and securing the men is the goal that satisfies the lack (hence, the call for men in elementary education). But Žižek (1992, 2006) makes Lacan's point that, while counterintuitive, the real purpose of a drive (a lack) is *not* achieving its goal, or satisfaction. Pleasure is derived in having a drive, desire, or goal, so the ultimate aim is not resolution, but is instead simply *to be*. A fantasy provides the coordinates of the subject's desire, establishing—not wish-fulfillment—but rather an instantiation of the desire, a scene in which the desire can manifest. Anxiety, in contrast, occurs when the object of desire is lacking. More specifically, anxiety is caused not by the lack of the object, but the lack of the desire that made the notion of the object possible.

Within this reasoning, the wish for more men in early education is a drive, a pleasurable and possibly productive fantasy. Building upon Lacan's theorizing, the wish is for the *idea* of men in educational contexts, but not to see them in the classroom next door. After all, if Mr. Smith shows up in the first grade room next door, a number of questions are likely to become important and bothersome: do we want him to be like his colleagues (a nurturing, comforting, “soft” male who can utilize women's ways of teaching)? In this guise, we may be comfortable teaching next door to a nurturing teacher, but will we also want to witness in a male teacher the behavioral manifestations of nurturing (e.g., caressing children)? Perhaps, then, we would prefer the teacher next door to be a sub-in for fathers missing from the home front, a man who can lift heavy boxes on the school site and discipline difficult boys. While we may be comfortable with having a male next door who can do the heavy lifting for us, is such a person a suitable colleague, or someone who can spend endless days with young children? Any “surplus pleasure” prompted by these questions, and subsequently experienced when the wish for men is fulfilled, cannot adequately compensate for the loss of pleasure that was provided by the fantasy of desire itself. Ultimately, then, it seems that wishing for men is better than actually getting them. How can this be so? We examine the weight carried by this wish later in the paper.

But first, we must address the separate desire carried by men who wish they could be teachers, those who inherently want to be elementary grades teachers. This desire, too, creates a fantasy life (this time for the potential teacher) that, in some cases, may be actualized. As in the previous example, when the desire to become an elementary teacher is fulfilled, it may not live up to the fantasy. When wish-fulfillment occurs, men report ambivalently about their experiences as teachers in the elementary grades. After interviewing several males who were primary grades teachers, King (1997) concluded that work experience is just that (a real effort to fit in). Despite the myth that males do not pursue careers as elementary teachers because they are not nurturing or patient, research shows that male teachers often do embody these traits and practices (see, e.g., Seifert, 1988b; Hansen & Mulholland,

2005). In King's (1997) research, many men characterized themselves as teaching in "women's ways," though they were often dismissive of their female colleagues' enactments—even when these were skills the male teachers claimed to have mastered better than their female colleagues. The irony (and hubris) in the previous statement is noticeable, and these men may be seen as "winning" a contest that only they know about. In contrast, other men who participated in early elementary teaching culture viewed themselves as "lone wolves," solitary and individualistic. Even still, these men claimed that their teaching was far superior to that of their female colleagues. Ultimately, men's fantasies about teaching may supersede their enactments, their own estimations to the contrary. That said, understanding the sources of our differences in teaching may assist all of us in meeting the task with some wisdom and reserve.

In contrast to gendered contests about "who is better at what," Reskin's (1991) research pragmatically suggests that the very inclusion of men in female workspaces, such as elementary teaching or nursing, raises both the prestige for and the salary of the work (see, also, Padavic & Reskin, 2002). Rich (2014) agrees, writing,

Across the country, teaching is an overwhelmingly female profession...Jobs dominated by women pay less on average than those with higher proportions of men, and studies have shown that these careers tend to enjoy less prestige as well...despite inroads that women have made entering previously male-dominated fields, there has not been a corresponding flow of men into teaching and nursing. (n.p.)

Because we view increases in both prestige and salary for teachers as positive outcomes, we must look elsewhere and look differently for the sources of anxieties that plague suggestions about staffing primary classrooms with men. If it is not the ability of males to be nurturing and patient or the potential impact (higher pay and prestige) of male presence on the profession that prevents males from becoming early childhood teachers, then what is it? We argue that, in contrast to the ubiquitous, yet unexamined call for men in elementary education, few have actually argued on behalf of men and their rights to be teachers of young children. More importantly, even fewer have questioned the fit of women in their "natural" role as teachers in the early grades. For us, this is the problematic "elephant in the room" that has evaded critical scrutiny; it is a complex fist of problems that merits deconstruction.

### Moral Panic, the Pedagogy of Love, and Teaching as "Women's Work"

The historical construction of early childhood education as "women's work" has been documented extensively in academic scholarship (e.g., Hoffman, 2003; Tyack & Hasnot, 1982). Weems (1999) summarizes this research, explaining how Pestalozzi's notion of "the pedagogy of love" (Gutek, 1968) and Catherine Beecher's metaphor of "republican motherhood" were appropriated by Horace Mann and

utilized—quite successfully—to argue his perspective that women were uniquely suited to assume the position of teacher (Weems, 1999, pp. 27-38). The legacy of Mann’s belief dictated that the purpose of early childhood education was to mould and support the fragile moral development of the Innocent Child, a social construction of the Victorian era. This assumed innocence of children continues to function as an underlying social construction and political lever (Kincaid, 1994) and the Innocent Child remains a supposition which undergirds assumptions about the profession of early childhood education, necessitating a particular kind of teacher-as-mother in role.

Although conversations about the place of males (and, by extension, the place of females who do not adhere to the role of “mother”) in elementary education are possible in an era of postfeminist inquiry and influence from constructs for identity, such as positioning theory (van Langenhove and Harré, 1999), Weems argues that educational contexts continue to be policed, with “contemporary witch-hunts to rid schools of ‘perverts’ by either firing or forcing to resign those who fall outside the bounds of hetero-normativity” (p. 32). To Weems’s binaries of boundary policing, we would add: “mother/non-mother.” Weems argues that, as a result of efforts to “protect” innocent children,

Male elementary-education teachers (regardless of their sexual orientation and marital status) particularly feel the effects of moral panic. Many are presumed to be gay, given the hetero-normative assumption that gender deviance equals homosexuality. By historical definition, attributes of elementary educators include gentleness, nurturing, and a strong penchant for order. These characteristics, considered markers of femininity and women’s ‘true nature,’ make male primary educators suspect as good role models. (p. 33)

The paradox in Weems’ binary is that men who exhibit the very qualities valorized by early childhood professionals (gentleness, nurturance, and order) are disqualified from being teachers because these attributes also signify “queer” when deployed by men.

Or, is it instead the case that “the gays” have been suppressed into duty as placeholders for men’s deployment of these otherwise admirable qualities? That is, by their association with “tainted personages,” the value of the virtue is also tainted. Underlying the bullying here is a cultural need to keep homosexuality an undesirable state, and the strategy to do so is misogyny. The inherent “value” in being perceived as homosexual must be kept at a minimum so that accusations of being gay continue to have their intended illocutionary effect: shaming, shaping, and controlling the behavior of all men. In this way, accusations of being gay are an effective control mechanism for the management of (presumably) heterosexual males, specifically delimiting males as inappropriate for teaching young children. In the U.S., calling someone “gay” is usually predicated on behaviors construed as “feminine,” “what girls like,” or “anything pink.” Misogyny is used as a negative threat to keep all men in line, where “in line” is used as synecdoche for patriarchal

cultural mores. And yet, we reiterate, these are supposedly the very competencies desired for early grade teachers.<sup>1</sup> Weems (1999) concluded her examination of the historical precedents that continue to inform beliefs that teaching young children is “women’s work” with a call to action: “Defining the work of elementary education as a project of morality has led to the vigilant regulation of sexuality in elementary-educational contexts. It is time to redefine the project” (p. 34). It is that project we hope here to advance.

### Mother-Teacher, Teacher-Learner: Containers of Irrationality and the Return of Difference

In contrast to descriptive or feminist-inspired criticisms of teaching as “women’s work” was a mid-twentieth century groundswell against women’s monopoly in elementary teaching. This resistance stemmed from a pro-male backlash to women’s “feminizing” of teaching and what were characterized as women’s deleterious effects on young males, a social, and perhaps non-intellectual, movement that occurred largely in the United States in the 1970s and currently manifests, unabated, in the UK and other countries. Sexist devaluing of women’s work is a timeless strategy. Smith (1973), for example, argued that young boys were harmed by an exclusively female environment, a refrain repeated by Rich (2014), who wrote, “some educators say boys, who tend to struggle in school more than girls, could use more male role models, or simply people who understand them, in the classroom” (n.p.). Likewise, Sugg (1978) coined the term “mother/teacher” to highlight the convergence of these two roles; from his masculinist perspective, it is a marriage Sugg regrets. Given the time of his complaint (the 1970s being somewhat of a watershed for misogynistic critiques of elementary education practice), it is not surprising that Sugg was first “alarmed” at the feminization of education and then found educational staffing by women to be wanting. His claim is based on a nostalgic look back to a time in education when “male role models” dispensed knowledge and disciplined behavior, “losses” Sugg longs to replace. To us, Sugg’s claims appear sexist and based on static notions of expected, gendered behavior (Butler’s [1997] “gendex” construct). But, what is lacking in Sugg’s critique is a critical examination of his claim for the isomorphic nature of mothering and early grades teaching, a topic we now examine, not with hopes of evacuating women, but instead understanding what it is both women and men might productively do (and avoid doing) when intending to teach young children.

#### *Are You My Mother?—Woman-Mother-Teacher and the Trouble with Caring*

The role of mother as synecdoche for woman is one that has been critiqued by feminists for decades. Chodorow (1989) delineated what she viewed as a duality: the simultaneous blame toward and idealization of mothers. The density and stability of this paradox led Chodorow to suggest that, “Blame and idealization have become

our cultural ideology” (p. 90). But how can such a stalemate have an impact on the act of teaching, where teachers generally do not work with their own children? The metaphor for early grades teaching as mothering (the moulding, shaping, and nurturing as children enter schooling) requires projective identification between what mothers do and what teachers do for children. In one model, the common denominator is care (see, e.g., Noddings, 2003, 2005).

While we would argue strongly that teachers often do care about and for the children in their classrooms, we believe that care in and of itself is an insufficient exchange for teaching. At the very least, teaching also involves teachers’ knowledge of content subjects. Further, the construct of care is yet another unexamined cultural holding that begs for critique (see, e.g., Matias & Zembylas, 2014; Tronto, 1993; King, 1997). We agree with Chodorow that the (blame/idealization) dichotomy that leads infants to a rage response may also lead students to similar anger and simultaneously requires teachers (like mothers) to suppress their own anger. It is because we cannot surpass idealization and engage differently that theories about mothering (and teaching) ultimately lead to stalemates. In fact, we remain trapped in the dominant cultural theorizing that centers on the idealization of mothers, which “rest[s] on fantasies and unexamined notions of child development” (Chodorow, 1989, p. 90). Culturally sedimented notions of the developing child and the nurturing mother may say more about *our* needs for children than describe the development of individual children. Early grades teaching may be one place where providing developmental contexts for young children may be interrogated in systematic ways, ways that studies of mothering have been unable to disintegrate. Mothering may resist interrogation because of the intimacy between mothers and their infants, whereas teaching may offer us opportunities to examine the fantasies of mothering, one step removed. Interrogating such underlying notions, however, is complex.

Intending to teach from a stance of difference from child-centering might be a subtly different psychological task for females and males. For example, choosing to focus on science content (say, photosynthesis) de-centers the developing child from the teacher’s focus. The psychological process of differentiation, which results in the recognition of difference (for teachers and others), begins with the internalization by the infant of the primary caretaker’s role (as other) and the caretaking itself (as somatic experience). While the care-giving can provide the infant pleasure, the source of the pleasure (mother) is soon experienced by the infant as “not me.” Butler (1997) theorizes that, as the lost mother is never really let go, mourning is an inappropriate metaphor; rather, it is melancholia, or a registering of the missing part that is still in some ways present. Eventually, the present/no-longer-present mother is internalized. But the internalization process may be differentiated for boys and girls, so the earliest attitudes toward mothering emerge in the earliest differentiation of self. Psychoanalytic theorizing provides a way of understanding the emergence of difference by examining the separateness, differentiation, and the theorized perception of that constructed difference by the infant. Yet, female

infants confront the emergence of difference with some sense of reserve. First, there is the nascent notion that the female infant is like her mother. This sameness is fuelled by the mother's construction of the female infant as "like her." This likeness constitutes an early, pre-verbal, somatic sense of primary oneness with the mother. It is the oneness with mother that transforms into oneness as mother that both enriches and complicates teaching decisions. These musings suggest for Butler (1997) that identity and eventually care-giving, may emerge as conflictual for males. A boy child must learn his gender identity as being not-female, not-mother. Therefore, what it is to be male is not female, not feminine. Masculinity is constructed in opposition to being female (clearly, this reasoning is part of the misogynistic bullying we described earlier). Therefore, "self" for males is "not-mother." Masculinity is fashioned and policed by what it is not: being a woman. To some extent, these constructed, gender-based identity positions also determine how we each appreciate, value, and use knowledge as projective instantiations of that early difference. It is true, however, that both sexes, female and male, must establish individuation in relation to the mother. But, because the mother is also female, separation is different for females and males, and therefore influences daily decisions having to do with teaching focus.

#### *Child-Centered Pedagogy and the Teaching Transaction*

One way to examine what teachers "do" is by re-imagining acts of pedagogy from the perspectives of psychoanalysis, a project aptly initiated by Felman (1997), who characterizes Freud as a teacher to posit that he is a capable teacher because he is a capable learner. Further exploiting the reversal, she adds,

What is unique about Freud's position as a student—as a learner—is that he learns from, or puts in the position of his teacher, the least authoritative sources of information that can be imagined: that he knows how to derive a teaching, or a lesson, from the very unreliable—the very *non-authority*-of literature, of dreams, of patients...a knowledge that does not know what it knows, and is thus *not in possession of itself*. (p. 37, *emphasis in original*)

Teaching understood as authority's investment in unreliable knowledge is not unlike the learner-centered pedagogy that was a hallmark of early childhood education, or at least in the rhetoric about it.<sup>2</sup> At least nostalgically, an early grades "centering on the child" would be consistent with Felman's characterization of Freud's learning/teaching methods, and also consistent with "women's ways of teaching" (Weiler, 1988). In this account of the psychological exchanges in everyday teaching, learning from the other is a surprise based on a return of difference (Felman, 1997). Todd (1997), also referencing a return of difference from students, suggests that, through classroom interactions based on teachers' desires to learn from the students, difference is observed and located within the students. Teachers re-present that constructed difference, a discursive creation, back to the students in order

to teach about difference. We encounter, in both Todd (1997) and Felman's (1997) characterizations, some psychological underpinnings of what it might be like for an early childhood teacher to “center on children”: teachers become the students of their young pupils and the phrase “child study” takes on a new substance, a data-based reality. We wonder how interacting with anticipated difference might be understood to occur for male teachers with, perhaps, different sets of gendered behaviors.

But even if the teacher manages to organize herself in a way that actually puts students at the center of the educational enterprise, it may not be good for either participant—the teacher or the child. For teachers to expect a return of difference in response to their instruction, their question, their personage as a teacher, is in fact to re-enact the separation of being a mother. In her critique of a child-centered teaching environment, Walkerdine (1990) suggested that female teachers identify strongly with their students, highlighting, in particular, early grades teaching where the adult female shunts her own desires in order to make way for the emerging child. Walkerdine views such an intent as irrational and, in her view, female teachers of young children become the “containers of irrationality” (p. 54). The outcome, according to Walkerdine's feminist perspective, is that teachers harbor resentment resulting from their deferred, more self-centered desires, resentment that is ultimately projected back onto students in some disciplinary, commodified form. We agree with Walkerdine's critique of teachers' shunting of personal desire, and suggest that it may be the very closeness to their students that causes teachers' introjected dissatisfaction to be borne by their students, and essentially prevents these teachers from being more effective for their young pupils.

In contrast, teachers' recognition that their students are not part of the teacher seems a minimal aptitude for creating independent learners. Consider the act of mothering from the perspective of the developing infant: historically, caregivers (mothers) productively mirror for the infant in order to facilitate the infant's sense of self. So, false mirroring that secures the infant's attention for the acknowledgement and benefit of the narcissistic parent also fails to establish independence and an adequate sense of self for the infant. Guessing what is in mom's (or, by extension, the teacher's) head is a trap. The infant, who is successful at supplying mother with her desired self-validating attention, becomes the student who can provide the teacher with her prescribed answer. “Love” is transacted via accuracy, thus screening teachers' and students' latent hostilities.

For both of the authors, based on years of teaching, interaction with primary grade children seems initiated and organized by our agendas as teachers. Rather than a return of difference, asking a question of first graders is predicated on an expectation that the answer will confirm something the teacher already knows. This is clearly a patriarchal exchange: a knowing teacher's question; a student's obsequious response; a teacher's self-gratified, even libidinous, response to students, who are then positioned as sending their “love” via answers the teachers already knows. Here, pedagogy constructs love-relationships based on accuracy (a token) from the

teacher's perspective, and the student's ability to infer what the teacher wanted. We suggest that the preceding is a common, even every-minute occurrence in pedagogy and that fantasies about "the child" are more about the teachers' own desires and needs for confirmation and love than about their pedagogical practices. This seems to us a transaction that must at some point be paid for by students and teachers at some personal costs.

Ultimately, teaching is not mothering, and mirroring may not produce the independence desired in the social settings of school. Whereas a non-mirroring (say, a narcissistic) mother may not provide needed child development contexts, a teacher's narcissistic attachment to knowledge as object, may propel learning in students who anticipate the experts' ways of doing science, literature, art, and mathematics. Expertise and apprenticeship may be more productive motivators for learning than mirroring. Since fathers allow for greater independence and engage with their children in more open verbal interactions than mothers and men are presumed to understand difference in ways that promote individualism and expertise (Cox et al., 1992; Krampe & Fairweather, 1993), it seems likely that they may also be productive teachers of young children.

Therefore, we suggest that "teaching like a mother" may not be the best way to support a young person's development of independence, of separateness, and of individuation. We also realize that actual teachers, both female and male, may or may not teach in these ways. We suggest, like Walkerdine (1990), that popular notions and values held in the culture value females reproducing motherhood and consequently influencing the development of children. This comes to us as an uncomfortable realization... we are seemingly squarely in a community with those like Sugg (1978) and Smith (1973), asking: What kind of man should be teaching children, and what demons do we call down when we invoke masculinity as a cure for what ails primary education?

### Mirroring Desire: Interrogating the Pleasures of Teaching Children

One outcome from a self-sacrificing teacher is the virtual silence surrounding teachers' potential for desire. After all, if the teacher is fantasized as a selfless conduit for the "emerging child," there is little reason to consider what she may want. Watkins (2008) goes so far as to mention that desire is "demonized in relation to teachers" (p. 113), but in arguing *for* desire, she remarks that teaching desire is "immanently woven into the practitioners' relationship with their students... This is particularly the case in the elementary school teacher, who is in close contact with up to 30 students, five days a week for a period of a year" (p. 114). In situating her perspective, Watkins points out that teaching desire is necessarily for the Other, but is careful to reference McWilliam's circumlocution of subjection by referencing "a desire for the Other's *achievement* and the resultant pleasure that ensues for both

teacher and student" (p. 115, *emphasis added*). From this standpoint, Watkins argues against previous uses of psychoanalytic theory to understand teaching desire (cf., Felman, 1997), stating, "these theorizations do not go far enough in conceptualizing the pedagogic relationship between desire and the body and its subject formation" (Watkins, 2008, p. 118).

We argue the obverse: psychoanalytic accounts of pedagogic desire have been subverted by tangential issues (such as Watkins' attempts to explain teaching desire through habitus and monism), and not sufficiently examined as inter-intra-psychic constructs. In fact, to some extent, Watkins may agree: in what appears to contradict her own thesis, she writes, "the notion of desire pursued here stresses that [discourse and representation] must not be conflated with the materiality and performativity of the body" (2008, p. 119). And then, on the subsequent page, she offers a reiteration of the point: "Desire, therefore, is not simply spoken into existence; it has a corporeal basis derived from an individual's ongoing affective engagement with the world" (p. 120). To which we would add, "...and mediated by its psychic representation."

In discussing others' work on the nexus of learning to write, learning to teach, and teaching/learning desire, Watkins quotes Jones: "Via perfect writing, I desired to deliver perfect mind to my teacher. The predictable and painstakingly even shape of my words signalled my willingness to conform, to be controlled which pleased my teachers" (Jones, 2000, p. 53). But Watkins denies Jones of her own interpretation: "Jones's willingness to please here is an act of conformity but not, as she seems to suggest, a form of subjugation... Desire for the Other, in this case, the teacher, while possessing the potential to be abusive, as in any unequal power relationship, is what motivated Jones to succeed" (p. 119-120). One can disagree when and where desire/subjugation, love/abuse delimit each other, but our point in this convoluted citation matrix is to show that Watkins solidly makes our point on the validity of studying desire as it is manifested in the everyday teaching practices of everyday teachers. It is important to understand what contributes to the underlying desire that operates through teaching.

#### ***Cultural Pedophilia and Children as the Containers of Adult Desire***

So, where does all this theory building leave us? What does it allow for? In this section, we issue a forthright interrogation of situations that result from our theorizing. We return to the question of who shows up when we issue the call for more men in early education. Often, at least in the mind of popular culture, men who desire to teach young children are axiomatically pedophilic. If the claim is to have men in elementary and early childhood classrooms, doing so requires inviting in "The (Potential) Pedophile." So, in addition to males who devalue women's early education work in sexist ways, we are also including men who are, at least rhetorically, positioned as pedophilic by their very desire to teach (be with) young children.

Snyder (2008), for example, acknowledges that the lack of men in elementary

teaching may be linked to “possible fears of lawsuits around accusations of sexual abuse of children” (n.p.). Elsewhere, King (1997) has made the point that men who choose early grades teaching carry this supposition with them. His informant, Van, reported on his internalized sense of being monitored for pedophilia, noting, “I think that there will always be a fear that any man on staff is there only for one reason, and that is to get at some kid. (...) It’s not going to change. It’s part of the job” (p. 77). Van is resigned to the monitoring, but the impact is greater than the self-monitoring he must maintain. As he states:

I have to be rather insensitive to these kids. I don’t like to be, but I could lose my job. Say, I was spending extra time with a little girl who just lost her father, whether through divorce or death, I could actually help her through a tough time by being a father figure. But others [adults] might say “Why is he spending so much time with that little girl?” (p. 79)

Since *any* sex act is inadmissible in any classroom, teachers’ sexual desire should not be intersected with their teaching of students of any age (child or adult); sexual behavior, non-educational sexual discourses, and even sexual innuendo are all inappropriate in educational contexts. As such, performing acceptable instantiations of “heterosexual identity” and enduring the speculation and inspection of everybody in order to “pass” as non-pedophilic are every day, job-related expectations. These tests may be as simple as playing with balls or using “locker room” banter, as long as, by displaying these attributes, the male disavows any sexual positioning. It stands to reason, then, that teachers with pedophilic desire should not be precluded for that fact alone. Suggesting that a pedophilic teacher cannot control himself in a classroom is like saying a heterosexual male plumber cannot control himself while fixing a pipe at a sorority house.

Rather than determining who is or is not pedophilic, here, we cut the cloth differently by instead addressing the ubiquitous notion that male teachers of young children are, until proven otherwise, automatically suspect for pedophilia. As opposed to excoriating the individual pedophile (an act and personage that remain illegal), we seek to examine what value the (constructed) pedophile holds in hopes of exposing the pedophilic practices treasured in contemporary culture. Arguing on the side of extant pedophilic cultural practices is delicate work; in essence, this is the work of re-viewing the obvious. Scholars like Mohr (2004) have undertaken this endeavour through efforts to recover the pedophilia embedded in everyday life, including (for example) advertisements and anti-drug campaigns. Arguing that the Victorian era construction of an ‘innocent’ and ‘pure’ childhood is undercut regularly in media and popular culture, Mohr (2004) concludes that, “today’s hysteria springs mainly from adults’ fear of themselves, but this fear issues from their half recognition that to admit explicitly, as pornography does, that children are sexy would mean that virtually everyone is a pedophile” (p. 28-29). Higonnet (1998) similarly confronts discourses about pedophilia and child pornography through

her critical exploration of photographs of children. Higonnet’s study interrogates the work of numerous photographers, including Anne Belle Geddes, who gained celebrity status with her photographs of children dressed not only as angels and butterflies, but also as vegetables, flowers, and other flora and fauna. Her subjects are often nude, their bottoms exposed or their genitalia carefully concealed by a leaf, pedal, or other prop, where concealment enhances the value of the occluded. Geddes’s books have been translated into 25 different languages and published in 83 countries, selling more than 19 million copies (Geddes, 2012a). Perhaps more than any other photographer, Geddes has created an empire based almost exclusively upon the exploitation of children’s bodies: in addition to selling more than 14.5 million calendars across 55 countries, Geddes’s images can be purchased on a range of products (such as postage stamps, gift cards, and even an “Anne Geddes Visa Platinum Rewards Card” featuring one of four Geddes images—two of which are images of children). Fans can also download five different Anne Geddes apps for Apple’s iPhone, iTouch, and iPad, including “Anne Geddes Marvels,” an “exciting new matching card game” that allows users to “[v]iew Anne’s work in a new and engaging way as you unlock galleries and slideshows *that allow you to zoom and explore image detail like never before*” (Geddes, 2012b, *emphasis added*). As Higonnet concluded, “If Geddes’s enormous popularity is any indication, we—a buying public—enjoy the tension between knowing and not-knowing, between believing and denying the visual conventions of childhood” (p. 82).

Analogous to Geddes’ exploitation of infant bodies, child-star worship regularly sexualizes underage adolescents with teen magazine details of their “dating” exploits. Kincaid (1998) makes a careful, critical study of ways that popular culture trades in the sexualization of youth, those children we wish we could “freeze in time.” Building on the work of Kincaid, Weldy and Crisp (2012) write,

Pop-culture figures like Taylor Lautner and Miley Cyrus are admired as attractive children, and their being on the cusp of maturity serves as an intensifier of their attractiveness as forbidden sexual objects. But once these figures mature, their cultural attraction in this context fades and viewers transition to new, fresher (meaning younger) signifiers to mark as simultaneously adorably innocent and erotic. (p. 370)

As evidence, one need only look at the upset and commotion that resulted when Miley Cyrus transitioned from more “feminine-as-innocent” and child-like locks that flowed past her shoulders to a much shorter, more “adult” haircut. While one may initially think a young star’s haircut would be ultimately inconsequential, the resulting fervour further underscores the cultural investment placed upon these idealized children on the cusp of adulthood. As a second, more explicit example, Pipedream Products modelled their “Finally Mylie Love Doll” after Miley Cyrus and commemorated Justin Bieber’s “coming-of-age” with the release of its “Just-In Beaver” blow-up doll, a sex toy that almost immediately sold out. The existence of products such as these, not to mention their sales numbers, seem to validate the

sexualization of children by adults. In September 2015, Neil Patrick Harris offered more overt confirmation by revealing that singer Nick Jonas is his “celebrity crush.” Harris stated,

He was really good-looking even before it was allowed to think he was good-looking, which was a bit of a problem. You kind of had to wait until he turned to be—you know, [laughs nervously] 19 to 20, and then you were like “What is happening??” (Williams, 2015, n.p.)

The point of the preceding discussion is to demonstrate that pedophilia and sexualizing children are cultural phenomena that recursively use children’s bodies as sites that contain adult sexual desire. The objectification and exploitation of children’s bodies are justified and rationalized by the “fact” (what is, actually, a culturally constructed belief created by adults and bestowed upon children) that children are innocent and pure. Therefore, we like to claim, so too is our admiration of (and pleasure derived from) their bodies. So powerful are the guilt and anxieties surrounding the sexiness of children (or, minimally—should we presume that children are, in actuality, pure and innocent—the myriad of ways in which children are sexualized by adults), that we feel compelled to deny its existence while attempting to demarcate the “difference between a healthy and normal love of children and a love which is sick and freakish” (Kincaid, 1998, p. 3). In the face of guilt, constructing the figure of “The Pedophile” provides a mechanism for both exciting (promoting) and policing (denying) our collective behavior. The Pedophile allows us to assume the position of “concerned citizens” and identify (and righteously reject) specific forms of child-loving and pedophilia as abhorrent; we allow ourselves to “disown [these narratives] while welcoming them in the back door” (Kincaid, 1998, p. 6).

### *Invoking Spectres, Policing Boundaries*

More to the point of our current examination of men in elementary education, accusations of pedophilia are likely to be trotted out when workspace, gender conformity, or other liminal boundaries are thought to need patrolling. In our case, it is the spectre of the Pedophile invoked through the invasion by males of what has come to be women’s spaces. The invocation of the Pedophile to police the boundaries of early childhood has had a remarkably effective run in dissuading men from participation. In early grades teaching, since the beginning of the twentieth century, women in the U.S. have had almost exclusive claim on this occupational niche. From our perspective, the uniform de-sexualizing practices of early childhood educators may suggest other, deeper knowledge operating within the system. It is often observed that primary teachers, like idealized mothers, wear “sensible shoes and shapeless dresses” (we can already hear the response: “You try sitting on the floor all day with kids!”), but the regularity of clothing choices is akin to an unspoken, voluntary acceptance of de-sexualizing uniforms, a vow of chastity, a vow of fashion vacuity.

As further evidence, we offer the counter-example of the “T.I.L.F.” (the “Teacher I’d Like to Fuck”). Derived from the colloquial acronym, “M.I.L.F.” (the “Mom I’d Like to Fuck”), the T.I.L.F. is a stereotype constructed as the “sexy” teacher who disregards unwritten demands for de-sexualized uniforms, wearing, perhaps, more make-up than a teacher “should,” a pair of spike high heels, and form-fitting, shape-flattering clothing (our essentialized characterization noted). Invariably, the T.I.L.F. is distrusted, more likely spurned by her (heterosexual-identified) female colleagues and administrators, as she simply “just doesn’t fit in” with the rest of the group. In actuality, “just doesn’t fit in” is code for the fact that the T.I.L.F. has the recognized potential to serve as an object of admiration to queer-identified male colleagues and administrators, a sex object for heterosexual-identified male colleagues and administrators, and an object of desire for the children.

The preceding are obviously additional binary constructions, stereotypical teacher tropes (the school marm and the T.I.L.F.) we offer as a means of problematizing the unexamined assumptions undergirding calls for increased numbers of male teachers in elementary classrooms. These figures allow us to consider what underlying pleasures are occluded in cloaking the teacher’s body. Why is the exchange of (false) purity so important to this enterprise? Recall that even in the middle of the twentieth century, females in the U.S. who taught were required to be single, and were told regularly what they could (not) do out of schools and after school hours. Even after married women in the U.S. were “allowed” to teach, they could not do so when pregnant. To return one more time to the figure of the T.I.L.F., we argue that her rebuff is even more insidious than we suggested previously: ultimately, she is spurned because she threatens to expose what everyone else is doing; those sweaters, aprons, and seasonal broaches operate as costumes that conceal the bodily attachments to their desires. Teachers are supposed to be de-sexualized; if you decouple the body from the desire, it is not sexual (but point-in-fact, it is) (cf., McWilliam, 1997).

The relationship-to-difference described previously may position men to be in a unique position to provide care, while simultaneously keeping a distance borne of their difference from mother. Inviting men into this educational nunnery, however, would upset further the libidinal economy that denies women’s sexuality and uses the surplus pleasure for the hard, underpaid work of educating children into the culture. The “masculinity” of male “sub-in-for-fathers” teachers serves to project an aura of unquestioned heterosexuality. In some ways, he, like the T.I.L.F., doesn’t “fit in” with the others. While detrimental to the T.I.L.F., the male “sub-in-for-fathers” teacher may remain a figure desirable to female colleagues and administrators: he completes the heteronormative mother-teacher/father-teacher relationship, strengthening further the pseudo-parent/child bond that helps obscure the subaltern desires within early childhood education. Ironically, it is this presumed heterosexuality that may also be the “sub-in-for-fathers” male’s downfall: ultimately, he, like the T.I.L.F., threatens to expose the pedophilia permeating the teaching of young

children; eventually, he, like all men in early education, will be asked, “What kind of heterosexual male wants to spend that much time with children?”

Perhaps, then, the “soft” male utilizing women’s ways of teaching and “caring” for children is the male figure “we need” in elementary classrooms. The “femininity” of the “soft” male teacher may initially make him a desirable figure to female teachers and administrators: nurturing and caring, he is a safe figure in this environment because he fits in and is “one of us;” he is “one of the girls.” While the “masculinity” of “sub-in-for-fathers’ male teachers establishes a presumption of heterosexuality, the “femininity” of the “soft” male teacher carries automatically a presumption of queerness. Ironically, just as “masculinity” is a male teacher’s undoing, “femininity” operates similarly for “soft” male teachers. Beliefs that queer-identified males are pedophiles persist and the “soft” male teacher would too easily bring unwanted attention, yet another threat to the carefully-fashioned facade that elementary schools are “safe” environments for children.

### Concluding Comments

A few directives are in order to understand the complexity of the related arguments we present. First, we are not providing an apology for actual pedophilia. Rather, we examine the construction of the phantasm of ubiquitous pedophilic desire that we recovered from everyday cultural practices, both within and outside of classrooms. Second, we are not mounting an attack against women or, specifically, against women teachers. Rather, we suggest that it is productive to examine the desire structure, the construction of “fantasy students,” and teachers’ psychological use of these students as part of their everyday teaching, a recommendation potentially productive for all teachers (Felman, 1997). Third, in utilizing strategic essentialism, these formulations are not based on actual teachers, actual genders, or actual students; we are, in fact, distanced from the very categories upon which we rely to make our arguments. The real target here is, of course, the use of relationships between these constructed categories within the act of teaching, how the teacher understands her/his self as a teacher, and how that identity is suffused in the discursive acts that comprise daily teaching. Our focus on early grades teachers who happen to be disproportionately female is the consequence of the culture’s comfort with equating teaching with mothering, an analogy we hope to have problematized. Our motivation for writing this essay was to call attention to the ways in which teachers invest their desire and identities into their acts of teaching.

Kelly (1997/2013) argues, “students identify with the teacher as the locus of desire and take on as their own the desires of the teacher” and suggests that this pedagogical version of transference and counter-transference is particularly dangerous for women “whose position in the social order is constituted negatively and against the odds of attaining control over the processes of signification” (p. 134). In contrast, we have suggested repeatedly that the professional and social context of

early grades education purposefully reverses the gender polarity of these dynamics and places prospective male teachers in a position “constituted negatively.” It is by examining the psychological subtexts of this teaching that we might operate differently for the benefit of all parties involved.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Others have also commented on the specific contributions of females as teachers. Luttrell (1996) has made the case that literacy (a mainstay of elementary curriculum) is often construed as “women’s work.” Addressing the clean-up done by literacy educators of under-prepared college students, she observed that this “*developmental* education” is “scutwork” performed almost exclusively by women. Furthermore, the title of the discipline “developmental education” is a catch-all for remedial intervention in post-secondary classrooms that obliquely references early childhood efforts in child development, all of which act to form a metaphor for adult education that is like early childhood, presumably because of the inadequacies of the learner, and the heroic intervention by caring teachers. Likewise, Nias (1989) documented the prevalence and preference for women in British “primary” grades (equivalent to U.S. elementary), making the case that teachers of children enact several roles while tending to their young students, but claiming that these selfless teachers also maintained a “substantial self” that held their core beliefs about kids, teaching, and the call to service. While Nias was descriptive in her accounts, Luttrell intended her attribution (and critique) point to be the devaluing of the work *because* women do it.

<sup>2</sup> Our use of *was* here is a necessary qualifier, given the more recent “academic” push down and concomitant accountability into the early grades.

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