



Teachers and educational policies: Negotiating discourses of male role modelling



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HIGHLIGHTS

- This article explores how teachers negotiate role modelling discourses in England.
- Discourses of role modelling have become more subdued in policy and media circles.
- However, they retain some currency, including among teachers.
- Teachers take up and negotiate these discourses in various ways.
- Several effects of these discourses on teachers are identified.

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ABSTRACT

Since the 1990s there has been some considerable discussion in English education policy of boys' underachievement and of male teachers serving as 'role models'. Drawing on two separate research projects, this article explores the diverse ways in which individual teachers negotiate discourses of role modelling, while also considering the performative nature of these discourses and some of their effects on teachers. The article shows that discourses of role modelling retain some currency among teachers and highlights the need for contemporary research on equality issues to inform the work of both policy-makers and teachers.

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1. Introduction

Since the 1990s, there has been some considerable discussion in education policy of boys' underachievement and, related to that, of male teachers serving as 'role models'. Such discussion has unfolded in a number of countries, including Australia, Canada, Ireland, New Zealand, the United Kingdom (UK) and the United States (US) (see Arnot, David, & Weiner, 1999; Bouchard & St-Amant, 1996; Brown, 2012; Brownhill, 2014; Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998; Martino, 2008; Mills, 2005; Moreau, 2014; Rezai-Rashti & Martino, 2010). While it is often assumed that boys' underachievement and the 'lack' of male role models in schools

represents a global concern, it has generated limited interest in some countries, for example in parts of the 'Global South' and in France (Moreau, 2011a; Robert, Pitzer, & Muñoz García, 2016). Moreover, even where this discussion has unfolded, it has taken various forms which are context-specific (e.g. with a focus on White working-class boys in some countries and on Black boys in others). This debate has been particularly vivid in England (Brownhill, 2014, 2015b; Brownhill & Oates, 2016; Epstein, Elwood, Hey, & Mans, 1998; Francis & Skelton, 2005; Hutchings et al., 2008; Maylor, 2009; Skelton, 2002; Skelton, Francis, & Valkanova, 2007), where a wealth of policy initiatives have been implemented (see, for example, DCSF, 2009; DfES, 2004; DfES, 2005a). While there has been a noted reduction in the prominence of this 'policy drive' in the recent years, discussions of role modelling retain some currency in public and professional arenas with the notion of role model itself having become part of a 'common-sense' discourse (Lyndon, 2015; Robb, Featherstone, Ruxton, & Ward, 2015; Tarrant

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et al., 2015).

In England, where the research reported in this article was conducted, discussions of role modelling have been overwhelmingly related to concerns about boys' underachievement, although such discussions have also been linked to girls' and women's under-representation in STEM [science, technology, engineering and mathematics] subjects and careers (MacDonald, 2014; Marchetti & Raudma, 2010). Despite the fact that the term 'role model' is often left undefined, discussions of role modelling in English education policy have usually been underpinned by a constant set of assumptions. In particular, it has been claimed that boys are 'underachieving', that students see their teachers as 'role models', and that providing boys with same-sex teaching role models will have a positive effect on their sense of identity, their behaviour and their educational attainment (see discussions in Francis et al., 2008; Hutchings, 2002; Moreau, 2011a). In England, this discourse of role modelling also coexists and interconnects with a discourse of 'feminisation', which constructs the presumed statistical and normative feminisation of the teaching profession and of school cultures as a 'problem', while male teachers and the 're-masculinisation' of teaching are presented as the 'solution' (see discussions in Moreau, 2014; Pepperell & Smedley, 1998; Skelton, 2002). Such views need to be reinstated against the broader national and international context of recuperative masculinity and backlash politics (Faludi, 1991; Lingard & Douglas, 1999), which claim that the traditional gender order has been inverted and that women and minority groups are now in a dominant position.

Despite the considerable amount of policies and research articles dedicated to this topic, a relatively modest body of work has specifically explored how teachers themselves engage with the discourse of role modelling. This dearth of research implies that teachers passively absorb and implement policies and plays down their ability to 'encode'/'decode' policy discourses (Hall, 1973). The scarcity of work in this area appears problematic, as the views that teachers and school leaders hold about gender and other equality matters have been found to influence the formers' pedagogical practices and the latter's decisions about staff recruitment, deployment and promotion (Moreau, 2008; Skelton, 2002; Spender, 1982) – all matters which in England have been increasingly devolved to school level.

The theoretical approach underpinning this article is similar to the one adopted in our earlier work (e.g. Moreau, 2011a) and draws on a social constructivist perspective informed by feminist post-structuralist theories of gender in education (Connell, 1987; Skelton & Francis, 2009). According to this approach, gender is conceptualised as a power relation and a key component of societies and individual identities (Le Feuvre, 2008). Centre stage is given to the concept of discourse, defined as a set of social practices and ideas which form the objects of which they speak (Burr, 1995; Foucault, 1969; MacLure, 2003). In other terms, discourses are 'performative' rather than simply indexical or descriptive (Foucault, 1969; Litosseliti, 2006). Discourses help to establish and maintain relationships of power and define the subject positions available to individuals who simultaneously engage in negotiating discourses (Litosseliti, 2006; MacLure, 2003).

This article pursues a dual purpose. Firstly, it explores the ways in which individual teachers engage with discourses of role modelling. Secondly, it considers the performative nature of discourses, i.e. how they produce what they name (Butler, 1993; Francis, 2006; Henriques, Hollway, Urwin, Venn, & Walkerdine, 1984). In doing so, this article adopts a deconstructive standpoint which acknowledges the need 'to resist the inscriptions that draw us towards some unproblematised acceptance of the "truth"' (Raphael Reed, 1999, p. 93), while simultaneously considering the effects of the circulation of such 'truths' (Moreau, 2011a).

2. Research and policy context

In the 1970s and 1980s, UK policy concerns around gender and education focused on girls' attainment and their subject and career choices. Around the same period of time, a significant body of work looked at the 'hidden curriculum' of schools and at its effects on girls (Deem, 1980; Griffin, 1985; Mahony, 1985; Sharpe, 1976; Stanworth, 1987; Woods, 1990). From the 1990s onwards, this focus shifted to boys who were thought to be underachieving in the midst of a 'crisis of masculinity'. Related to this policy shift, a significant body of work started to question the claims underpinning discourses of role modelling, highlighting in particular the lack of supporting evidence and their uncertain theoretical basis (Arnot et al., 1999; Arnot & Mac an Ghaill, 2006; Carrington, Tymms, & Merrell, 2005; Epstein et al., 1998; Francis & Skelton, 2005; GEA, 2009; Hutchings et al., 2008; Moreau, 2011a). Despite a lack of evidence and, more recently, the emergence of a body of work highlighting that teachers' gender has no impact in most contexts on students' attainment (Helbig, 2012; Lam, Tse, Lam, & Loh, 2010; Neugebauer, Helbig, & Landmann, 2010), many policy-makers did, and continue to argue, that the statistical and normative feminisation of teaching deprives boys from role models, ultimately causing their underachievement (DfES, 2005a). In the UK, the interconnectedness between the discourse of role modelling and the discourse of the feminisation of schools is well-exemplified in a declaration of Anthea Millett, the former Chief Executive of the then Teacher Training Agency (TTA), who argued that '[t]he feminisation of the [teaching] profession leads to an absence of male role models for many of our pupils, particularly those from the majority of one parent families' (Millett, 1999, p. 2). Views such as Millett's construct the feminisation of the teaching workforce as a problem that needs to be fought, as it allegedly deprives children, particularly boys, from male teachers, brings into schools 'feminine values' which are seen as necessarily endorsed by women and girls, and threatens the professional status of teaching. In comparison, male teachers are presumed to provide (positive) role models for boys as their physical presence is presumably sufficient to improve boys' sense of identity, behaviour and attainment (Robb et al., 2015).

In England, these concerns have characterised most governments in place since the late 1990s, with some unusually consensual views on the topic across the political spectrum (for a more detailed account of this, see Moreau, 2011a). After the New Labour government arrived in power in 1997, the Green Paper *Teachers: Meeting the Challenge of Change* (DfEE, 1998) revealed how governmental concerns for the 'modernisation' of the profession and its 're-masculinisation' meshed together. Over the years, this concern persisted. In 2002, the then TTA launched a campaign to attract more men. A few years later, its successor, the now defunct Teacher Development Agency (TDA), aimed to attract candidates from 'under-represented groups' to teaching, referring *inter alia* to men (TDA, 2007). David Blunkett, then Secretary of State for Education and Employment in England, claimed that underachievement was 'linked to a laddish culture' and called for 'better role models in our schools and society more generally' (DfEE, 2000; cited in Carrington & Skelton, 2003, p. 254). Damian Green, then Shadow Education Secretary, expressed some similar concerns (BBC, 2002) and so did the then General Secretary of the National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT), David Heart: 'We're going to face a catastrophic situation over the next five years. We can't afford to let teaching become an all-female profession. It will cause long-term damage to the education of boys, of that there's no doubt' (cited in Pyke, 2000). In some instances, concerns for boys intersected with race and class, with, for example, 'Black boys' and 'White working-class boys' specifically mentioned (Abbott, 2002;

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