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# Why the decline of Irish male teachers?

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# Teaching matters

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## Why the decline in male primary school teachers?

In this world of profit and efficiency the topic of gender is often overlooked. However, gender is impacting on Irish society and culture in new and interesting ways. This year alone saw the first openly gay contestant crowned the 56th Rose of Tralee; the annual Lisdoonvarna Match-making Festival includes a weekend for the LGBT community and Panti Bliss' 'Noble Call' oration on homophobia in Ireland grabbed international attention.

The landscape is shifting particularly for Irish women. Women have taken to the political and economic stage like never before. The May 2014 elections saw a rise of 34% in the number of females elected to political positions. The appointment of two additional women to cabinet in July 2014 marked a breakthrough in Irish public life with the highest number of women in senior ministerial positions ever. While the gender equality lens has traditionally focused on women the spotlight is now firmly fixed on men, a spotlight that Michael Kimmel (2010) believes obscures as much as it illuminates. For that reason, what are the consequences for men when women can both bring home the bacon and fry it up in the pan? (ibid: 3)

### Gender in Ireland: A brief overview

The 1922 *Irish Free State Constitution* guaranteed inter-alia equal rights and equal opportunities to all its citizens. However, the definition of citizenship heavily depended on gender-role expectations. The word 'woman' meant domesticity, nurturing and dependency. Hence citizenship for women was clearly defined in their roles as wife and mother.

Up until 1973 women were forced to resign from the civil service when they got married so they could concentrate on domestic duties such as home-making and child-rearing. It was not until Ireland joined the European Union in 1973 that Irish progress on gender equality in education was reflected in legislation.

European legislation introduced *The Amsterdam Treaty* (1999), which, for the first time, gave power to outlaw all discrimination based on gender. Irish legislation introduced *The Employment Equality Act* (1998) and *The Equal Status Act* (1999), which outlawed sexual harassment and discrimination respectively. However, not all initiatives were welcomed. *The Exploring Masculinities Programme* (1999) was developed and piloted in a number of all male secondary schools (1997 – 1999). The programme aimed, among other objectives, to investigate different perceptions and experiences of masculinity. The programme was developed with funding from the European Social Fund. However, the programme failed due to misconceptions surrounding the concept of masculinities.

*...what are the consequences for men when women can both bring home the bacon and fry it up in the pan?*

### The question of masculinities in schools

Recent reports describe the significant decline in the number of male teachers in both primary and secondary schools. The Central Statistics Office census data (2011) reveal that just over a quarter of primary and secondary school teachers combined are male. The gender gap is wider when one considers primary level only. Current undergraduates in Irish colleges of education support this gender trend. The decline in male teachers is not unique to Ireland. UNESCO Institute for Statistics (2012) illustrates that the gender crisis

within the teaching profession is a world-wide phenomenon. This leads us to the question of masculinities in Irish primary schools. The caring qualities needed for teaching are deemed to be natural, intuitive, and inherently feminine. Unfortunately such stereotypes coupled with longer hours and reduced pay discourages men from joining the teaching profession. Nevertheless, the Y chromosome can make a significant impact for pupils and colleagues in the primary school setting.

There are 87,357 teachers registered with the Teaching Council in Ireland (2014). This number comprises 77% female teachers and 23% male teachers. A recent decline in the participation rate of male teachers in the primary school workforce is in proportion with the shrinking number of male teachers in positions of power. A recent report compiled by the ESRI on behalf of The Teaching Council suggests that male teachers had low job satisfaction levels compared to their female counterparts. Indeed, gender has been mentioned more frequently than any other aspect of identity as a source of unfair treatment in schools (Lynch and Lodge, 2002).

### Conclusion

I am researching in depth what it means to be a man in the teaching profession today. If you are motivated to make a contribution to this research topic or have any queries about this article please do not hesitate to contact me at: okeeffesuz@hotmail.com

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