

*Male teachers*

The shocking story of Kato Harris, a teacher falsely accused of rape, has focused many teachers' minds on the precariousness of their positions in schools. I've taught for over two decades in various schools, and I'm now a Teacher Educator in a university. My experiences though don't tally with Kato Harris's in that I've seen too many teachers get away with abusive behaviour for too long. In my first job, a colleague of mine, who worked with me for a few years, was arrested for abusing children we taught together; none of us suspected anything, but it turned out that during school trips he had sexually assaulted boys in our class. In my next job, the creepy senior manager who flirted with the girls was eventually barred from the profession for having an affair with a student, and a horrible sixth form tutor who mesmerised the boys in his form with his tales of sexual exploits was arrested for possessing thousands of images of child porn. Then in other posts, I came across the charismatic music teacher who liked to snog sixth form girls on school trips in full view of everyone, and the now retired head of sixth form who had, for years, slept with his female pupils. What happened to these two? Neither of them were "caught" despite the best efforts of various concerned professionals to pursue prosecutions. None of the victims would come forward because they didn't want the stress -- and also because they were still hypnotised by these characters. It's difficult to convey the power that a striking teacher can have over teenagers, who, for all their big bodies, are actually vulnerable children. They need to be protected in a way that they haven't been in the past.

This said, teachers need to be protected too. It's a fine balance. In my early career, I had a child make a complaint about me when I held him by the arms; I believe it was dealt with by the school appropriately, and I learnt my lesson: avoid touching students. This can be a problem; particularly if two students are fighting, but, by and large, if you provide a calm, disciplined environment in your classroom, you don't need to touch any students. I've seen inexperienced colleagues more recently come unstuck with this: one teacher was accused by a naughty pupil of groping when all the teacher had done was touch her on the arm. The complaint was solved because there was CCTV footage of where the alleged event took place, and it clearly showed that the teacher did no such thing. The teacher in question was a woman -- which goes to show that it's not only men who are victims of false allegations.

One Friday morning in my fourth year of teaching, I received a letter from a parent which stated that her daughter, one of my Sixth Form students, had made a serious allegation about me. Terrified that it was a false allegation -- the girl liked to smile at me in class -- I informed my superiors: my Head of Department, the Deputy Head and the Headteacher. They were all men and assumed it was a serious allegation: I was not to talk to the girl and the headteacher met with her mother. It turned out that the "serious allegation" was minor; it was a disagreement over a grade I had given her. My relief at the end of the day was immense.

Men may be more vulnerable to allegations and malicious gossip because they are in such a minority and stand out. Almost 3 out of 4 teachers are female with 85% of full-time (FT) primary school and 62% of FT secondary teachers being female. As the Department for Education points out, every year the percentage of female teachers grows. It's up by 1% since 2010 which amounts to roughly 5000 male teachers leaving the profession in this time. That's roughly equivalent of 250 large primary schools!

Things were different, particularly in secondary schools. In 1993, the year in which I had to deal with that “serious allegation”, men outnumbered women as school teachers. The same trend is even more pronounced in primary schools: a quarter of the sector now have no male teachers.

So what is going on? Is it the threat of facing serious allegations that is putting men off going into the profession and making them leave? Or are there other factors at play?

For Neil, a primary school teacher in the north of England, it’s a lot to do with money. He told me: “Pay is definitely an issue. I have a young male colleague who is personable, intelligent and an excellent teacher, but he’s leaving the profession because he can make so much more money as an estate agent – and have a much more stress-free life.”

All the other teachers I interviewed agreed on this fundamental point: teachers, for the skills and work required, are underpaid. Ed, a secondary school teacher in north London, told me: “If teachers were paid like bankers, you’d see lots more men in the profession.”

None of the teachers I spoke to felt that the threat of false allegations was decisive in stopping men going into teaching, although it was a factor. A young English teacher Abdul, told me that early on in his career at a girls’ school, he noticed the girls in his class stuffing crumpled up paper into their tops. “They wanted me to look at their chests and then tell everyone I was a pervert. Luckily, I ignored them and the problem went away!” Another English teacher, John, told me that it is a worry because his friend was suspended on the basis of no evidence because a girl accused him of groping her. “He was cleared after an internal investigation but it was shocking because he was guilty until proven innocent,” John said.

That said, these sorts of incidents are comparatively rare. As I tell my beginning teachers, if you’re careful, and you make sure you’re not alone with a student and follow standard child protection procedures, you shouldn’t get into trouble.

Nevertheless, male teachers are a bit nervous. Neil told me: “There’s definitely something a bit embarrassing about being a male primary school teacher. When you’re looking after little children, you feel very proud in one sense, but, on the other hand, you feel quite awkward, too. Being a primary school teacher challenges you as a male. When you meet people socially, at dinner parties say, you tell people what you do and there’s always an uncertain reaction. I always nearly end up talking to the women, the mums, and the men rarely talk to me. And then at school, you’re often the only man apart from the caretaker, and it’s difficult joining in the all-female talk in the staffroom, which can be quite shocking at times, quite sexist in a way that men are not allowed to be. So, in my career, I have had a lot of objectifying remarks made about me like I’ve got a nice bum, a good body, etc, and it’s a bit embarrassing.”

Neil’s case highlights a central problem with men and teaching, what I would like to call the “Focker” issue. You’ll understand if you’ve seen the comedies *Meet the Parents* and *Meet the Fockers*. Greg Focker, played by Ben Stiller, is a male nurse, and, for all his pratfalls in the films, he is presented, as good at his job in a female profession, caring but unambitious. A great deal of the comedy in the films is generated by the tension generated when he must deal with the father of his fiancée, Jack Byrnes, played brilliantly by De Niro; Jack is everything Greg is not; hyper-masculine, obsessed by status, and imposing, as he sees it, order. (Eventually we discover that Greg’s real first name is “Gaylord”, another play on the supposedly masculine stereotype.) There are quite a few male teachers who are like Greg in that they don’t necessarily want to be headteachers, but just want to give teaching a go because they care. These sorts of men are put off going into the profession, I think, because, as the *Meet the Parents* films amusingly illustrate, our society is intolerant of them in both overt and covert ways.

The three types of men who dominate teaching are of a different kind: I would categorise them as “supermen”, “serjeant majors” and “systems guys”. I’ve encountered many supermen in my career: men who are imposing or magnetically charismatic: the towering Head of Year who sang opera, was forever making witty quips, and charmed all his classes with tales from history; the brilliant cricketer who also delivered amazing lessons without preparing anything because he was so articulate and funny; the passionate maths teacher who was so enthusiastic about equations that even the most recalcitrant child was hypnotised into loving numbers.

Serjeant majors still prowl the corridors of many schools, making sure that everyone behaves: they love barking their orders at all and sundry. I’ve quite a few of them crash and burn, particularly ones who are inflexible. I wasn’t surprised when Michael Gove’s much-touted Troops to Teachers programme only attracted 102 recruits; one ex-soldier told me that no self-respecting officer would ever go into teaching because the money was “piss poor” and the working conditions “worse than the trenches”.

Finally, there’s an emerging breed of “corporate” teacher, the “systems guys”, who are forever hunched over their computers, processing data, crunching the numbers, re-arranging timetables, doing this or that teaching “intervention” which will solve all educational problems.

Daniel, a young teacher on the PGCE course I lead at Goldsmiths, cheerfully confesses to being a systems guy, and feels this is what drew him to the profession. He enjoys learning about and implementing the “evidence-based” teaching strategies that have been “proven” to work in various bits of research. He told me: “Yes, I do worry about the lack of men in the profession but that said, it’s difficult to generalise because I have really benefitted in working with a female teacher who has showed me to be more intuitive and positive with my students which has meant I’ve become much better at dealing with bad behaviour.”

Most of the male teachers I spoke to were very reluctant to generalise about their situation but nevertheless felt uneasy about being men in an increasingly “feminised” profession.

This reflects a deeper crisis of masculinity in our culture; many men feel trapped by narrow conceptions of who and what they are meant to be. Men now account for three quarters of all suicides in the UK, with 80% of teenage suicides being boys. Perhaps it’s no coincidence that boys lag significantly behind girls in terms of attainment at school and account for 70% of children with Special Educational Needs.

Can we solve men’s mental and educational problems by having more male teachers? The evidence suggests not. Many of the myths about male/female teachers are false: men are not, on the whole, better at teaching boys; single sex schools do not get better results than mixed sexed ones, and it is the wealth of a pupil’s background which has three times more effect on attainment at 16 than gender. Let’s also bear in mind that research shows that the vast majority of students do not regard the lack of male teachers as a problem.

The stark truth is that men are vanishing from the teaching profession because it is comparatively poorly paid, it’s stressful and they have plenty of other options -- in a way that many women feel they do not. Even though, on average, men have worse educational qualifications than women, they still hog the top jobs in politics, the arts, the media, law, medicine, science and finance. The typical male graduate can expect to earn 20% more than his female counterpart, despite having feebler credentials.

I can’t help but speculate that if opportunities were more equal overall, you’d see more men in teaching. Everyone wins when society is more equal: boys would achieve more highly and there would be more male teachers.

