

## **Women teachers in boys' schools: Experiences and perspectives**

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## Abstract

This qualitative study explored the experiences and perspectives of sixty-five women teachers working in all-boys' primary and secondary schools of Trinidad and Tobago. A purposive sampling method was employed, utilizing standardized, open-ended interviews as the data collection method for the study. Data analysis consisted of examining, categorizing, and tabulating the evidence to address three research questions of the study. Three themes emerged from the study, namely, the role of women teachers in the education of boys; confronting the gender challenge; and women teachers as effective, dynamic, and resilient in the face of difficulties. Women teachers in the study believe that despite challenges, they can make a significant difference in the educational and social outcomes of boys. The results of this study cannot be generalized to the larger population of women teachers in the Trinidad and Tobago school system. However, the study is important because it serves to introduce the conversation of women teachers' experiences and perspectives in the context of a feminized Caribbean school system.

**Keywords:** Women teachers, boys' schools, experiences and perspectives

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Previous studies have highlighted the issue of male academic underachievement in the school system, and the role of male teachers in improving boys' educational and social outcomes (Jha & Kelleher, 2009; Worrell & Noguera, 2011; Cushman, 2008; Kindler & Thompson, 1999). Other studies have addressed more specifically the question of the male teacher as a positive role model for boys (Davison & Nelson, 2011; Allan, 1994; Priegert Coulter & McNay, 1993; Montecinos & Nielson, 1997; Thornton, 1999). Notwithstanding continued support for the male role model argument, many educators have challenged the merits of such an argument, referring to it as naïve and lacking empirical evidence (Skelton, 2003; Gold & Reis, 1982; Malaby & Ramsey, 2011). Faulstich-Weiland (2013) argues that men should not be employed principally as role models for boys; rather, they should be good teachers for all children. This position resonates well with pro-feminist writers who prefer to focus less on gender and more on what it means to be a good teacher (Lingard & Douglas, 1999).

Like other territories, women in the Trinidad and Tobago education system make up a large percentage of the teaching population, with 78% of female teachers operating in the primary sector and 69% teaching at the secondary school level (Trinidad and Tobago Ministry of Education, 2014). There is also a large percentage of women teachers working in all-boys' schools in Trinidad and Tobago. While women teachers outnumber men at all levels of the school system, very little work has been done to highlight the experiences of female teachers especially in all-boys' schools.

In an early study on the experiences of women teachers in boys' schools, Askew and Ross (1988) highlighted four dimensions to women teachers' experiences, namely, teaching style and pupils' reactions; undermining by male colleagues; exclusion from staff meetings; and sexual harassment. Using a case-study approach, Bailey (1996) also explored parallel experiences of women teachers operating in boys' schools. Other studies on female coaches' experiences in coaching boys suggest that while women coaches enjoyed the job of coaching boys, they experienced difficulty obtaining respect and felt the need to adopt masculine characteristics in order to be taken seriously as coaches

(La Fountaine & Kamphoff, 2016; Norman, 2013; Blom, Abrell & Wilson, 2011). In order to succeed in an all-boys' school, Maxwell (2015) found that female teachers must have solid discipline methods, practice professional distance, as well as demonstrate a caring attitude towards the boys they teach. While some women teachers face challenges, Normore and Jean-Marie (2008) support the view that female teachers and administrators can play a very important role the education of boys.

Several studies have provided examples of successful strategies for teaching boys effectively. These include emphasis on project-based education where the teacher facilitates hands-on, kinaesthetic learning; competitive learning opportunities even while holding to cooperative learning frameworks; structuring lessons as games to maximize student engagement and participation; offering choices to boys in topics that appeal to them (Gurian & Stevens, 2010; Hawley & Reichert, 2010; King & Gurian, 2006; Stevens, 2006).

While a large percentage of women teachers function in all-boys schools, very little is known about their challenges and successes. This study attempts to initiate a conversation that focusses on the experiences and perspectives of women teachers operating in all-boys' schools in Trinidad and Tobago.

## **2. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

The purpose of the study was to explore the experiences and perspectives of women teachers who teach in boys' schools in the Trinidad and Tobago primary and secondary school system. Three research questions served to focus this investigation:

1. How do women teachers describe their experiences working in boys' schools?
2. How do women teachers perceive their role in the education of boys?
3. How do women teachers characterize their relationship with male teachers, principals and other stakeholders of the school?

## **3. METHODOLOGY**

### **3.1 Description of the participants**

A purposive sampling method was used to obtain information from sixty-five (65) women teachers who teach in all-boys' schools in the Trinidad and Tobago primary and secondary school system. Based on their teaching experience, these participants were categorized as novice teachers with 0-5 years' experience; developing professionals with 6-20 years' experience; and veteran teachers with over 20 years' experience. Table 1 provides additional demographic information of all participants of the study.

**Table 1. Demographic Data of Participants**

<i>School Category</i>	<i>Novice Teachers</i>	<i>Developing Professionals</i>	<i>Veteran Teachers</i>
Primary	Four (4) women teachers with 0-5 years' teaching experience	Nine (9) women teachers with 6-20 years' experience	Twenty-three (23) women teachers with over 20 years' experience
Secondary	Five (5) women teachers with 0-5 years' teaching experience	Nineteen (19) women teachers with 6-20 years' experience.	Five (5) women teachers with over 20 years' experience

### 3.2 Design

Qualitative interviews were conducted utilizing fourteen standardized, open-ended questions for all sixty-five participants of the study. These questions were designed to explore the experiences and perspectives women teachers working in boys' schools both at the primary and secondary levels of the education system. Some of these questions centred on the major challenges encountered at the school; the role of the female teacher in the education of boys; the attitude of boys regarding the teaching and learning process; the nature of relationship with male colleagues at the school and gender issues associated with job performance.

### 3.3 Procedures and Data Analysis

Standardized, open-ended interviews were used as the data collection method for this study. Although in this design participants were asked to provide open-ended responses, some of these responses were written to allow respondents the freedom to fully express their viewpoints and experiences in any way they feel most comfortable (Gall, Gall & Borg, 2003). While this approach presents additional difficulty with coding the data, it reduces researcher biases within the study (Creswell, 2007; Gall, Gall & Borg, 2003). All interviews took approximately forty-five minutes and were transcribed verbatim.

Data analysis for this study consisted of examining, categorizing, and tabulating the evidence to address the four research questions of the study (Yin, 2003). The following three themes emerged from information provided by participants of the study:

1. The role of women teachers in the education of boys
2. Confronting the gender challenge
3. Women teachers as effective, dynamic and resilient in the face of difficulties

## 4. RESULTS

### 4.1 The role of women teachers in the education of boys

Participants from both primary and secondary schools believe that they have a critical role to play in preparing boys for life in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Not only do they see themselves as counsellors, but they also believe that as mother figures, they have a responsibility to teach boys the importance of respecting women. They want boys to develop a good sense of self, leadership skills, strong moral and ethical values, and a keen sense of responsibility to others. Many of the participants also regard themselves as positive role models for boys. One respondent from a primary school puts it this way:

*I'm a good role model and I perform multiple roles in the education of the boys – mother, counsellor, mentor, nurse, you name it. One of the challenges we have in society is the way men are viewed in society as being in charge, being the leaders and that women should not possess any leadership roles in society. One of my goals in dealing with the education of boys is to show them that these stereotypical views should no longer exist - that there are women who are independent. They should recognize that women are excelling and should be respected and appreciated in the work place and as mothers and wives. They should view women as their equal and not feel threatened by women so that they would be better men in society.*

Women teachers at the secondary school level also echoed similar sentiments:

*I see myself as someone who could show boys that women are not always how society stereotypes them . . . that women could be thinkers and decision makers . . . and not just emotional creatures who depend on the compliments and support of men . . . I see myself teaching boys to be responsible and to see women as their equals. I think that's my role as a female teacher in a boys' school.*

One female primary school teacher had this to say:

*I want to see that no child is left behind. I pay extra attention to the boys that are high risk. I counsel them . . . I believe that boys deserve a chance to a good education and that's my role. I try my best to see to that.*

Another primary school teacher describes her mentorship role in this way:

*I am a female teacher who seeks to instil the necessary morals and values needed by these boys to equip them with the skills necessary for an evolving world. I mentor the boys as I see them as future leaders and fathers.*

### 4.2 Confronting the gender challenge

When asked to describe their relationship with male colleagues, only a few participants reported that they felt “disrespected,” and “intimidated.” One respondent felt that she was treated in a *condescending* manner. However, the majority of participants from both primary and secondary

schools described their interactions with male colleagues in more positive terms such as: “*protective and supportive, cordial and friendly, professional, respectable and collaborative.*”

One participant summarized the nature of relationship in this way:

*It is cordial and very professional . . . the doors of communication are always open . . . We respect each other and we work together as one administrative body to assist our students. It's nice working with male teachers. They give a sort of balance. They are helpful and respectful and they interact well with the female teachers. We have an excellent relationship . . . and there is good camaraderie.*

The majority of participants also felt that they generally maintain cordial relationships with parents and administrators in the school system. These participants believe that gender had more of a positive rather than negative impact on their experiences as women teachers in all-boys' schools. One participant stated:

*A lot of people are observing and saying that they thought the boys would be more receptive to the male teachers; but some of the males are not good role models and the boys see that and react accordingly. The boys actually show more respect to me as a woman teacher than they do to my male counterparts.*

Sharing her experience teaching teenaged boys, one secondary school teacher suggested that:

*Sometimes the boys need the softer touch and they need a gentler approach to dealing with certain issues. I have found that in cases where boys would not open up to other males, the presence and attention of a female teacher is critical.*

Another secondary school teacher shared:

*As a young teacher, the boys feel comfortable to speak to me when there is an issue bothering them... I have these motherly instincts. I know when there is something wrong with any one of my male students. I talk to them and try to advise them along the correct path.*

One primary school teacher responded in this way:

*I don't think my gender has any negative impact on the boys and my teaching experience in a boys' school. The students are very generous. They are willing to assist by carrying your bags, holding your books etc. I enjoy teaching at this school. I get the respect I deserve from members of staff, parents, and most of all the students.*

Recounting an initial challenge, another teacher had this to say:

*Initially my role as a teacher was tested by some rebellious boys but when I asserted myself as a firm, fair and caring teacher, most boys changed their negative attitude towards me.*

### **4.3 Women teachers as effective, dynamic and resilient in the face of difficulties**

Participants of the study identified “*inadequate resources, lack of administrative support, and student lack of interest*” as some of the difficulties teachers generally face in the school system. More specific challenges encountered as women teachers included “*student lack of respect,*

*perceived inferiority of female teachers by some males, and male opposition to female leadership,”* which often resulted in conflicts as teachers, especially in high-performing schools, jostle each other for positions of authority. Despite these challenges, the majority of women teachers reported positive outcomes in their relationships with students enrolled in all-boys schools both at the primary and secondary levels.

When asked about strategies used to ensure student success, the majority of respondents identified a variety of teaching and learning strategies ranging from *student-centred approaches, constructivism, and discovery learning, to hands-on activities, cooperative learning and differentiated instructional strategies.* One secondary school teacher observed that:

*Boys tend to be only interested in lessons when it makes sense to them and their real life situations. If the lesson isn't relevant to them, they lose interest quickly. The greater challenge in boys is to always create activities and strategies that keep their interest and show relevance to real life experience.*

To maintain classroom discipline, some women teachers admitted to using a *commanding voice* while adopting a rather *strict disposition.* Others described more successful strategies such as *delegating responsibility, engaging students in setting high standards of performance for themselves, and using different forms of positive reinforcement strategies.* Only a few teachers referred students to the dean or principal as a means of discipline.

Reflecting on her experience in an all-boys' secondary school, one participant had this to say:

*Teaching in an all- boys' school is really different from teaching in an all-girls' school. . . I have had to modify my teaching styles to accommodate the boys . . . I had to loosen up a lot when dealing with boys . . . and I think that I have developed my own sense of humour over the years. I think that I have also become more patient. Teaching boys has also helped me with dealing with my own children (2 boys) . . . so dealing with boys in school has helped me with dealing with my own children a little better.*

## 5. DISCUSSION

Three major themes emerged from information provided by participants of this study. The first theme focussed on the role of women in the education of boys. Results of the study challenge the popular male role model argument advanced by Davison and Nelson (2011); Allan (1994); Priegert Coulter and McNay (1993); Montecinos and Nielson (1997); Thornton (1999) and others. In this current study, women teachers believe that they too can be positive role models for boys with a clear advantage of teaching boys the value of respecting women as equals. While women teachers do not wish to diminish the role of men as mentors, they see themselves as having an important role to play in reversing stereotypes held by some men regarding the role of women as mothers, wives and professionals in the workplace.

The second theme in the study dealt with issues associated with confronting the gender challenge. While only a few participants felt disrespected and intimidated by male colleagues, the majority of women teachers reported positive interactions with their male counterparts. These experiences contrasted sharply with those women in the Askew and Ross (1988) study who experienced some degree of undermining by male colleagues. These women also experienced exclusion from staff

meetings as well as sexual harassment from some of their male counterparts. Quite the opposite occurred in this current study where the majority of women teachers were treated with respect and dignity. Women teachers found that their male counterparts generally treated them with professional courtesy and were often very protective of them.

While participants of the study did not see their gender as a challenge, a few admitted to adopting a firm, authoritative posture in order to gain respect from some male students whom they considered rebellious. This experience mirrors findings of studies by LaFountaine and Kamphoff (2016); Norman (2013); Blom, Abrell and Wilson (2011). In these studies women who coached boys felt it necessary to adopt what they referred to as masculine characteristics in order to be taken seriously as coaches. Maxwell (2015) concurs that women teachers must employ a combination of solid discipline and compassionate teaching methods in order to effectively teach boys.

The final theme highlighted women teachers as effective, dynamic, and resilient in the face of difficulties. When asked to describe the teaching strategies used to effectively teach boys, many of the respondents pointed to student-centred approaches which focused on discovery learning, hands-on activities, cooperative learning, constructivism, and differentiated instructional strategies. Studies by Gurian and Stevens (2010); Hawley and Reichert (2010); King and Gurian (2006); and Stevens (2006) confirm that hands-on, kinaesthetic learning, conducted in a differentiated instructional framework can be effective ways to engage boys in the teaching and learning process. Women teachers in the study believe that despite challenges, they can make a significant difference in the education of boys. They see themselves as confident and effective teachers who are well poised to positively impact the educational and social outcomes of boys.

## **6. CONCLUDING COMMENTS**

The literature has identified four dimensions to women teachers' experiences in boys' schools, namely, teaching style and pupils' reactions; undermining by male colleagues; exclusion from staff meetings; and sexual harassment. This study presents a different picture regarding the role of women teachers in boys' education. The study also shows how women teachers are able to successfully confront the gender challenge to the extent that they see themselves as capable and confident to effectively teach and nurture boys in the primary and secondary school system. While the results of this study cannot be generalized to the larger population of women teachers in Trinidad and Tobago, the experiences of these sixty-five participants certainly provide a platform for engaging in further dialogue about the value of women teachers in the education of boys.

## **7. RECOMMENDATIONS**

- There is need for further investigation into the challenges and successes of women teachers who operate in boys' schools
- Studies can be conducted also into students' perceptions of women as teachers in all-boys' schools
- There is need for further investigation into the issue of men versus women as role models for boys in the Caribbean context.



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