

Researching the Professional and Private Lives of Women Teachers: Our Quest for Our Own Stories

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ABSTRACT: *Recent research on teachers' stories has emphasised the importance of the recovery and affirmation of the voices of women teachers. Such research provides a significant medium for early childhood teachers to tell their stories and have their voices heard. This paper reports on a study which sought to express the voices of teachers as they discuss their accounts of the impact on marriage and motherhood on their perceptions of teaching as a career in postwar New Zealand. It identifies and discusses key methodological and conceptual concerns that arose and argues need for further research on early childhood teachers' experiences of teaching in which women's perspectives are positioned central to historical interpretation.*

INTRODUCTION

The past decade has seen a growing interest in qualitative research in educational studies and in particular the appearance of studies in which the teacher takes central focus; not as the object of research, but as the subject. Studies such as in the recent book *Teachers Talk Teaching* by Sue Middleton and Helen May provide an important medium for early childhood teachers to tell their stories and have their voices heard. An important feature of this, and similar work, is the emerging shift in interest beyond a focus on “great” women in teaching to that of the “ordinary” teacher working in early childhood settings. To listen to women’s stories of *being* a teacher, their relations with children and colleagues, and their insights into children as learners can be both an inspiring and an informative experience, one of direct relevance to the field of early childhood education. In this paper I report on a study in which I sought to express the voices of kindergarten teachers as they discuss the impact on marriage and motherhood on their perceptions of teaching as a career in early post World War 2 New Zealand. I identify and discuss key methodological and conceptual concerns that arose and argue the need for further research on early childhood teachers’ experiences of teaching in which women’s perspectives are positioned central to historical interpretation.

RECONSTRUCTING TEACHERS' VOICES IN EARLY CHILDHOOD

We are, each and every one of us who works in early childhood, part of the great unfolding story of early childhood education. The reconstruction of our history has implications for each of us, practically, politically and intellectually. As early childhood teachers we live with this history; our present lives are shaped by it and it helps determine our future.

Understanding of this historical past is necessary to validate our place in early childhood teaching today. For example, attitudes and practices towards gendered divisions of labour have built up over a long time. It is only in the light of this history that we can understand the significance of contemporary domestic ideologies and the gendered occupational structures in early childhood teaching. Anna Davin (1996) summaries this link between the past and the present saying:

It is essential, intellectually and politically, to try to understand the past if we are to understand the present and to work effectively for the present we want. Historical analysis enriches political understanding and counters today's emphasis on public personalities as opposed to historical and economic forces and processes. It can help people to see themselves as agents rather than as victims and to discover common interests and solidarities. As women we need our history. (p. 60)

Reconstructing the voices of early childhood teachers, both those in the past and of the present, is a powerful way to understand the continuity of experiences over time and between teachers in early childhood. As more research is carried out, women teachers' stories will increase in number to reveal the diversity and range of women's experiences within early childhood and to enrich our understanding, both personally and politically, of what it means to be an early childhood teacher. William Ayers (1992, p. 266) argues such research will provide, "an accurate portrayal of action as teachers themselves experience it, an account infused with immediacy, conflict and contradiction as teachers actually live it".

On a personal level the telling of our stories provides important understanding of our particular place in this shared early childhood history. It allows us to "think of our lives in terms of narrative at the intersection of multiple social and economic forces" (Green, 1995, p. 73). As we negotiate an identity for ourselves between the forces of the past and the future, we need understanding of the ways in which our personal lives can be penetrated by the social and the political, and of the processes of negotiation used in our personal constructions of what it means to be a teacher of young children. In short, we need to think critically about our experiences as teachers and as women.

Politically, it is argued we can not begin to articulate the present, to make changes, unless we know from where we have come. Helen May (1997, p:xvii) stresses the significance of this link between the past and present for her own work in early childhood:

As an activist, challenge and change was the task, but this was bruising and never smooth. Trying to locate and make sense of the past not only became a retreat from what seemed impossible at the time, but helped me recognise the processes of what are the politics of early childhood.

Yet encouraging women to speak for themselves brings its own problems particularly when the experiences of early childhood teachers are being researched. We work in a field of education traditionally accorded low status, in which women have historically found their voices silenced in their own worlds; their positions as teachers rendered powerless within research. How do we persuade teachers, whose voices have gone largely unheard, their experiences trivialised, their very being defined as “the other”; that their voices are significant and valuable, their everyday experiences as teachers working with young children of interest as a research topic? Nor should researchers assume a welcome response from early childhood teachers towards involvement in research. Work overload, negative beliefs as to the value of research, and perceptions of power inequalities between teachers and academics are likely reasons underpinning possible teacher resistance towards research (Miller, 1992).

Despite these and other concerns it is crucial that we undertake further research on women’s experiences as teachers in early childhood. Early childhood teachers are and always have been active participants in the shaping of events. Gerda Lerner’s (1997, p. 53) reminder that “women have always lived in history, acted upon it and made history” is particularly relevant for women in early childhood as we seek to have our collective voices heard. We must actively promote the need to research the histories of early childhood teachers, to bring the voices of the past to the fore and insist such stories are heard. This will provide an alternative set of stories about teachers and teaching to counterbalance accounts derived from positions of power and from policy makers and to ensure that the recorded history of teaching in New Zealand reflects the diversity and range of experiences of teachers from early childhood through to tertiary.

Such concerns became central in a recently completed study in which I examined the impact of domesticity on women’s understandings of kindergarten and primary teaching as a career in early post World War Two New Zealand (Bethell, 1998). I was interested in the stories of a small group of twelve women kindergarten and primary teachers as they negotiated their way through the gendered world of teaching from their entry in the 1950s through to the early 1980s. I sought to understand the

meanings these women gave to being teachers of young children. How did they perceive the relationship between their dual domestic and teaching identities? What processes did they use to move between these dual roles?

The women's stories provide a rich source of lived experience, allowing illustration and analysis of many enduring issues central to teachers in early childhood. In their accounts the women discuss careers, love, marriage, children, feminism, housework and politics. These stories expose their everyday gendered experiences and expectations of early childhood teaching and domesticity and identify the tensions and contradictions within this duality. How to understand and explain the women's response towards these tensions and contradictions became the central focus of the study.

The women's stories also illuminate the connections between biography, history and social structures (Middleton, 1993). These are set within key political, social and educational movements of the era, history that happened as women carried out their everyday lives with children in kindergartens and in their homes. The aftermath of the war with its focus on the family as the key to the reconstruction of society, the post-war kindergarten expansion, the shortage of teachers, notions of equality for women and the second wave of feminism provided a historical background for women's daily lives. Such events had a significant and unavoidable impact in shaping the opportunities and constraints available to women. Even women who resisted certain features still had to acknowledge their presence.

TENSIONS BETWEEN TEACHING AND DOMESTICITY

Historically women kindergarten teachers have been seen, both by themselves and by others, differently from male teachers in other sectors in terms of expectations and experiences of teaching as an occupation. Women kindergarten teachers have been, and remain today in the same fragile position: concentrated in an educational sector carrying low pay and low status and dependent upon the whims of politics for survival. These characteristics have their origins in the beliefs of pioneers such as Jean Jacques Rousseau and Friedrich Froebel towards women as the most appropriate teachers of young children (Singer, 1992). These beliefs were adopted along with the introduction of kindergarten into New Zealand in the late 19th century. Kindergarten teaching was viewed as an appropriate job for middle class women. It reflected women's traditional responsibilities for the care and education of children, especially young children, and provided suitable preparation for their future domestic role. For women who, either by choice or destiny, remained single, kindergarten teaching provided some financial independence and meaningful work. For the few married women in teaching, it was seen to provide hours and holidays that allowed women to teach without significant disruption to or challenging of, women's prime domestic responsibilities.

Although many historians have long been aware of these beliefs, most accounts have not considered the possibility of a fundamental clash between women's private world of domesticity and their public world of teaching. Such a clash, however, became a reality for kindergarten teachers in post-World War 2 New Zealand as demographic, political and economic changes transformed the character of the female labour force allowing some married women teachers to take up teaching positions simultaneously with marriage and motherhood rather than consecutively as before. The concept of women's dual roles in which women combined both paid employment and domesticity emerged to become a common female work pattern (Myrdal & Klein, 1956). The issue for women became how to manage the tensions and contradictions that arose between this duality. Unlike men, for whom the private and public worlds are linked allowing them to move freely from one to the other, women tend to face a fundamental conflict between the respective demands of their teaching and domesticity identities (Evetts, 1990).

Geraldine McDonald, writing in the 1970s, identified the central predicament faced by married women teachers at this time. "Society as a whole tends to present women with an either/or situation. It tends to be thought that she can be either a good mother or a good teacher but not both" (McDonald, 1976 p.18). Jill Julius Matthews (1984) makes a similar point arguing that while women gained more opportunities at this time, for "many individual women, this apparent freedom meant more fear and guilt, more failure". According to Matthews (1984, pp. 199 - 200):

This paradox came about because each woman was not in control of her choices; they all had strings attached. She could no longer abstain but was directed to make specific choices, all of which carried responsibilities, and her exercise of these responsibilities was stringently policed.

However, my interest in this topic emerged not only out of theoretical interests but also from personal experiences of marriage, motherhood and work. The research problem thus became both a blend of the intellectual and the personal (Reinharz, 1992). The significance of this relationship requires I locate my position as a researcher in the study and its relationship to the topic.

Upon leaving school in 1959 I had just one narrative for my future, one based around work until marriage and full time domesticity. I accepted, almost without question, the then clearly defined boundaries between female and male roles, the primacy of marriage and motherhood for women, and the domestic ideologies shaping these. On the birth of my first child in 1967, full time motherhood became not merely a role, but an identity, one I was to find both highly rewarding and extremely demanding, and one I expected to maintain for life. I did not anticipate my later

return to paid employment. Nor did I foresee that, after leaving school with no formal qualifications, a decade later I would take on the role of student. Over the next eighteen years, three more children were born. I tended the home, became involved in the Playcentre movement and later the Family Planning Association, studied extramurally to gain both a BA degree and postgraduate diploma, and gradually worked my way back into the paid work force and into teacher education.

These changes occurred within a time of massive social change, which changed irrevocably how I saw my future choices in life. It was also frequently a time of great tension as I sought to reconcile conflicting expectations of myself as a wife and mother with a growing need to assert myself as an individual. The personal became political, for myself and for women around me.

Upon reflecting on these dual experiences it became apparent that to explain women's career decisions I needed to examine the duality of their lives and the interconnections between these. I required a model that would recognise the aspirations of professional women and their need to bridge the personal and the social which existed between their career decisions and the politics of domesticity; one able to take into consideration the influence of the constraints and choices embedded in the context in which these women made their career decisions.

RECONCEPTUALISING WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES

Feminist historical theories provided the means to ground my research and to review and reconstruct previous historical accounts of women's experiences of teaching. The promotion of the concept of gender and the social construction of the different roles deemed appropriate to the sexes provides a central tool of analysis with which to challenge traditional definitions of women's position in teaching based around biological determinism and prevailing definitions of history and historical research. Rather than accepting as natural the widely held assumptions of women's kindergarten teachers' careers as built around the primacy of marriage and domesticity, I adopted a perspective suggesting this was and still is problematic for women. The object of the study then became women's perspectives of the impact of marriage and motherhood on their career decisions. This shift allows for new questions to be asked; questions concerned with the difficulties kindergarten teaching present for married women teachers.

Taking this perspective I found that married women kindergarten teachers in post-war New Zealand faced two pivotal issues: the first, the right of access to paid employment freed from discriminatory practices and attitudes, the second, the re-organisation of paid and unpaid work within the public and private spheres. In addition the use of experience as evidence needs to be placed within a critical examination of the workings of the ideological system that supports and reproduces this difference. As Joan Scott (1992, p.25) explains:

When experience is taken as the origin of knowledge, the vision of the individual subject (the person who had the experience or the historian who recounts it) becomes the bedrock of evidence upon which explanation is built. Questions about the constructed nature of experience, about how subjects are constituted as different in the first place, about how one's vision is structured - about language (or discourse) and history - are left aside.

Therefore, I needed a method that would allow examination of the relationship between the actions of women teachers and the ideological and material forces of the post-war era, which has so profoundly influenced them. One in which as Scott (1992, p. 25) argues, allows for "a way of exploring how difference is established, how it operates, how and in what ways it constitutes subjects who see and act in the world". A method that would recognise both human agency and the production of knowledge and culture and at the same time take into account the power of material and ideological structures (Weiler, 1988).

CONSTRUCTING IDENTITIES OF FEMININITY

Qualitative research with its central focus on the subject experiences of human beings provided a workable base for examining the lives of women kindergarten teachers. Unlike quantitative research with its emphasis on gathering facts about social phenomena and general belief in a fixed and measurable reality, qualitative research offers greater understanding of the processes by which women teachers perceive and construct their lives, and how this in turn influences their actions. Two key features of qualitative research became significant in shaping how I could conceptualise my approach.

The first feature sought to understand women's actions through their routinely constructed interpretations of their personal experiences of social reality. I took into account Alison Jones' claim that women's narratives can only be constructed from the language, meanings and ideas historically available to us (Jones, 1992). It was through a study of the women's points of view, interpretations and meanings of social reality that I began to understand their actions and the professional and personal decisions they made. As stated earlier, the opportunities and constraints available to women are shaped by the broader social context in which they live. Unless we understand the social context in which constructions of femininity are formed - for example, unless we can appreciate the persuasiveness of the primacy of marriage and motherhood of the early post-war era - we cannot appreciate the career and family decisions made by the women teachers in this era.

This approach enables women to "make themselves present in history and to define themselves as active authors of their own worlds". In taking this approach the

women become the focus of study, to be, as Kathleen Weiler (1988, p. xiii) states, “not the ‘other’ in an androcentric world, but as subjects and the centre of this social reality”. In short, research that is *for* women rather than *of* women.

The second feature assumed an ongoing, dynamic and negotiated reality between women and their relationship to teaching, marriage and family. Unlike earlier studies that tended to portray women as passive in the face of structural forces, I examined the diversity of ways in which these six women actively manage the shifting demands of their different identities and roles. I resisted earlier approaches that saw women as victims to the forces of ideological and material forces, preferring instead one in which women are portrayed as actively engaged in efforts to understand and interpret their own behaviour within their cultural context. David Thomas (1995, p.4) explains this saying, “these activities and striving imply the possibilities of shared or negotiated meanings, and shared and negotiated interpretations of both behaviours and thoughts”.

Notions of what it means to be ‘woman’ are constructed through dominant assumptions of femininity present at any one time, in any one setting. Jill Julius Mathews (1984, p. 8) argues this process is always political, with the meanings of being female “laid down by each individual and institutions which have power and authority” over individual women. “Every woman’s body and life, everything she does, thus becomes the objects of struggle for control by competing forces, each force proclaiming itself the upholder of the true ideal of femininity”. Thus women operate within, but are not necessarily confined to, these gendered boundaries.

I was particularly interested in how kindergarten teachers managed their own experiences to contest or resist the ideological and material boundaries imposed upon them within the home and in teaching. Despite the strength of traditional family relationships as experienced in post-war society the women's stories show their attachments to gendered ideologies were not as exclusive or as static as commonly portrayed. Rather the women upheld a dynamic and active approach towards both spheres, involving them in a process of constant re-negotiation of their teaching and domestic roles in response to changes in the broader social context. The result saw significant shifts in gendered relationships within the women’s families and the redrawing of the boundaries of their lives throughout their careers.

Nor were the responses of the women towards the duality of their lives homogeneous. Rather they were heterogeneous, diverse and often divided. Sometimes women upheld the centrality of their domestic role to build their teaching careers around this, on other occasions they covertly adapted this role to allow for greater involvement in the kindergarten field, while a small number resisted the prescribed domestic role choosing instead to act outside its boundaries.

As exploratory research, this study produced hypotheses rather than generalisations about women's experiences as teachers. With just six kindergarten teachers it was not intended to represent the diversity of experiences of all kindergarten teachers but to gain insight into the lives and experiences of some women kindergarten teachers in New Zealand. My aim was to narrow the focus to capture the particular of the experiences of a small group of women. Their experiences were not necessarily uniform or even typical across all women teachers. However, within the framework of individual differences of experiences, I found that some aspects of the lives of the women in the study were representative of other women. Here the particular and the general met to identify the shifting relationships for women between paid and unpaid work, both over time and within this period.

The women's interpretations and understandings of their experiences reveal important sources of data in analyses of women and career and provide new understandings of how one group of women kindergarten teachers coped with and negotiated the conventions of post-war womanhood. These stories of women's experiences of teaching and domesticity open up new narratives for women and new ways of understanding old narratives.

Women kindergarten teachers in post war New Zealand then, as now, faced similar issues of paid work and family as women in every generation, yet the nature of these issues and the options and constraints differed in some significant aspects. A historical perspective identifies strong links between the history of women as teachers and shifting attitudes towards the relationship between women, teaching and family (Cooke, 1995; May, 1992). This awareness comes from an understanding of the cultural context *within* which women shape their lives and the dominant ideologies that support these. We need to understand the history of changes in each of these variables in order to understand the origins of domestic ideologies and gendered occupational structures as seen within teaching today.

Recognition of the need to contextualise women's experiences of work and domesticity overcomes the earlier tendency toward interpretations being ahistorical and thus misleading in that they make generalisations that fail to account for the beliefs, values and labour force needs at any particular historical moment. This allows us to distinguish between features that are historically specific, such as the post-war discriminatory policies based around women's marital and fertility status, or the post-war teaching shortage and those which tend to be constant over time such as gender differentiated divisions of labour within teaching and the home and the subordination of women teachers within the teaching sector. It assists us to see the pervasive nature of gendered divisions of labour and how the precise nature of this varies between societies and over time.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN MYSELF AS RESEARCHER AND THE WOMEN

The acceptance of the personal in research calls for a new definition of the relationship between researcher and subject in research. Rather than adopt the detached, objective, neutral stance common in more traditional approaches I needed to position myself explicitly as a “voice”, both in my interactions with the participants and in the writing of the study.

Feminist research recognises that researchers begin their investigation of the social world from a grounded position in their own subjective oppression. As Weiler (1988, p.58) explains, “feminists realise their vision of social reality and their own definitions of what is important emerge from their own position in society”. As indicated earlier my interest in this subject grew from my personal experiences of marriage, motherhood and teaching. I needed to recognise my own subjectivity and personal engagement in the research and to include some explanation both of my relationship to the women and to the subject matter at hand.

These personal experiences played a significant role, not only as the starting point of the study but also throughout the process of the study: in my interactions with the women, in the gathering of data, in the selection and analysis and in the interpretation and recording of the material.

In seeking to understand the position of women in post-war New Zealand I was seeking also to understand the forces that shaped my own changing experiences of marriage, motherhood and early childhood teaching. Sue Middleton (1993) argues that within life history approaches in women studies there are points of recognition - of affinities - between women. For example, my interest in the daily lives of women in early childhood is drawn from my personal and professional experiences of living within a world of inequalities, based around power relations and gendered divisions of labour within teaching and in the home. These shared meanings, both spoken and unsaid, built around commonality of gender produced connections between the women and me helped me to understand the choices and constraints faced by the women and the reasons unpinning their career decisions: connections less likely to be made by a male researcher.

My encounter with these women also resulted in personal changes in my own life both in increased understanding of the ways in which historical and social constructions of teaching as women’s work have framed and shaped my own experiences in early childhood and reaffirmed my own political and intellectual commitment towards the need for further research to uncover our shared early childhood history.

This background information is not presented as an admission of bias but rather as an explanation of my standpoint as the researcher. Nor, in recognising my perspective, do I suggest this means a total rejection of objectivity. Rather as Shulamit Reinharz (1992, p.263) argues, this involves recognition of “objectivity and subjectivity not as warring with each other, but rather serving each other”.

Ethical considerations became paramount in researching the personal and private lives of women. I was entering women's private lives and asking them to disclose personal information; matters often rarely discussed with others. This called for particular sensitivity and the need to develop a non-exploitative relationship of respect, shared information, openness and clarity of information with the women at all times. For example, women had the right to decline to answer any questions and to withdraw from the study at any time. I sought to ensure tact and discretion in the asking of questions and the use of the material. Prior to using any personal or sensitive data in papers and presentations I sought permission from women to ensure they felt both informed and comfortable about the general distribution of this material.

On occasions I had to balance my need for information with respect for women's right to choose to not disclose certain topics. For example, I was reluctant to probe when particularly sensitive, but potentially relevant, material was alluded to but not openly expressed. As a result, discussion concerning a possible lesbian relationship and extramarital affairs, factors which may have been defining features in the lives of two women, went unsaid and thus continue to remain hidden from view.

More practical issues arose relating to the role of the interviewer in constructing narrative and supporting the central research goal of enabling women to speak. I involved women in shaping the form of their own interview, enabling women to select from the interview schedule, sent prior to the interview, the questions, their focus and the order of topics to be covered. During the interview I intervened only to clarify or to refocus the discussion if this became necessary. This approach enabled women to focus in on to issues that were central to their particular interpretation of their experiences of kindergarten teaching.

Features such as those just described served to increase the theoretical and conceptual tools available for discussion and studying women kindergarten teachers. In particular, the placing of women as the subject of research allowed the asking of new questions and for women's perspectives of teaching to count as knowledge.

The use of feminist approaches in research allowed insight into women's experiences of teaching and to identify some of the ways in which kindergarten teaching and domesticity are fundamentally gendered concepts and historically and socially constructed in response to changing definitions of what it means to be female. May (1993, p. 1) sums up this situation asserting that, “the history of early childhood services is embedded in the story of the changing roles of women in relation to their

men, their children and their work". The core of which assumes the care of young children to be women's prime responsibility. These social and historical constructions of early childhood teachers linking mothering with teaching offered postwar married women teachers a socially sanctioned way to enter the public sphere of paid employment at a time when few married women worked, whilst still upholding their domestic responsibilities. On the other hand these assumptions tended to produce stereotypic and essentialized notions of women teachers as nurturers and carers of children: assumptions frequently internalised within women's perceptions of what it meant to be a teacher.

This close alliance of women and children continues to have particular implications for early childhood teachers today. As with the women in the study we regularly confront the need to find ways to deal with the problematic and often contradictory tensions that such embedded constructions can create within our daily work in early childhood. Further research is needed to identify these tensions and women's response and management of them.

In conclusion, my study contributes to the work of reconstructing women's historical past through the recovery and affirmation of the voices of women teachers. This work is essential to bring women's experiences of early childhood teaching into the history of education in New Zealand so that the range and diversity of women's experiences as teachers become part of the written record. Women's aspirations, potential and achievements must be located within their historical context for us to understand the opportunities and constraints experienced by women in particular historical periods. Qualitative research using narrative approaches allows ways for women's voices and stories to be heard. This recovery of voice through the telling of stories assists us to challenge previously held stereotypical and generalised perceptions of women teachers as passive victims of ideological and social forces and to promote a more accurate conceptualisation of women's lives as teachers through a view of women as active agents in the process of historical change.

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