

Feminising and masculinising primary teaching: A critical examination of the interpretive frameworks of male primary school principals in Hong Kong¹

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Abstract

Over the past two decades, the feminisation of primary school teaching has been identified by the media and government officials in Western countries as an important contributing factor to boys' academic problems. This panic, which has been criticised by feminists as a backlash and a form of recuperative politics, has promoted the development of research into gender and education, particularly studies related to the gendered culture of primary schools and on the masculinities of male teachers. However, male primary principals remain relatively under-researched in the literature, despite the importance of their structural position and increasing concern over the masculinisation of school leadership. This paper aims to contribute to the discussion by critically analysing the interpretive frameworks of twelve male primary school principals. The findings reveal not only the complex, contradictory and at times culturally specific gendered discourses that some male principals employ, but also their feminising and masculinising effects on the school workplace and leadership.

Feminisation of Primary Teaching?

Over the past two decades, the feminisation of primary school teaching has been identified by the media and government officials in Western countries as an important contributing factor to boys' problems (Cushman, 2008; Francis & Skelton, 2005; Haywood et al., 2005; Mills et al., 2004). More specifically, there have been claims that primary schools are dominated by women teachers whose feminine values and pedagogical styles are disadvantageous to the learning and academic aspirations of boys. Because of the lack of male role models in schools and at home, this has exacerbated, if not produced, boys' academic and behavioural problems. Campaigns

have thus been launched to retain and attract more males into the female-dominated teaching profession, but these have not been very successful (Skelton, 2009). Although feminists welcome the inclusion of primary teachers of diverse backgrounds and the recruitment of more men to undertake caring and nurturing work with young children (Ashley, 2001; Montecinos & Nielsen, 2004; Lingard et al., 2009), they criticise the arguments and assumptions behind the campaigns as a backlash (Francis & Skelton, 2005), a manifestation of “recuperative politics” (Lingard & Douglas, 1999) and an attempt at remasculinisation (Martino, 2008). To refute the fallacious claim that primary school is an over-feminised zone that favours girls, disadvantages boys and emasculates male teachers, studies have proliferated. Particular interest has been directed at (re)examining the gendered culture of primary schooling and teaching, and the experiences, perspectives and masculinities of male teachers of young children, which has greatly promoted the scholarship of gender and education.

For instance, Skelton’s seminal 2002 discussion challenged the ambiguous usage of the term “feminisation” and identified its various meanings. An important argument put forward is that the culture of the primary school is not determined merely by the number of women teachers. The numerical domination of female teachers may give the impression that primary teaching is “women’s work”, or caring work, yet this does not necessarily lead to the cultural valuation of feminine values or styles in primary teaching. In fact, the labour of female teachers tends to be devalued, as women are seen as being naturally good at mothering and caring (Acker, 1994; Haase, 2008; Thornton & Bricheno, 2006), and this devaluation can be demonstrated by the persistence of a gendered hierarchy in primary teaching. Studies have long criticised the pattern that men, the minority, manage, whereas women, the majority, teach and are managed (Evetts,

1990; Alder et al., 1993). A recent review shows that the teaching hierarchy in primary schools in many places remains gendered and unequal (Moreau et al., 2007). In the United Kingdom, men have a one in four chance of gaining a principalship, whereas for women the ratio is one in thirteen (Jones, 2008).

Instead of seeing the school environment as feminised, feminist studies argue that it is actually characterised by discourses of patriarchy and misogyny which trivialise women teachers (Acker, 1994), and by discourses of homophobia, heteronormativity and hegemonic masculinity, which produce complex, contradictory and unhealthy demands on male teachers (Thronton & Bricheno, 2006; Martino, 2008; Lingard et al., 2009). These latter discourses valorise men who display the dominant heterosexual masculinity and marginalise those who do not. They police the acceptable boundaries of masculinity by encouraging male teachers to distance themselves from activities and positions that are conventionally understood as feminine, such as early childhood teaching; inciting in them the fear of feminisation (i.e., not being “real men”) and stigmatisation (i.e., being labelled as sexually suspect, a paedophile, or gay) (Allan, 1993; Lupton, 2000; Sumsion, 2000; Pullen & Simpson, 2009). In other words, they privilege, value and idealise male teachers but simultaneously discipline, normalise and demonise them. The existence of these discourses has, in fact, forced some men who do not and cannot align themselves with the “imaginary male teacher” to leave the teaching profession (Mills et al., 2008).

Moreover, studies that have closely examined recent educational restructuring alert us to the *dual* presence of feminisation and masculinisation in primary schools (Mahony et al., 2004), because the school workplace is increasingly characterised by neo-liberal and new managerial, viz.

masculinised, values that privilege competition, performance and assessment. These new concerns have changed the emphasis of the curriculum, structure, organisation and management of schools and place new demands on school personnel (Mac an Ghail, 1994; Skelton, 2002; Thornton & Bricheno, 2006). For instance, to meet the needs of the competitive education marketplace, school leaders and teachers are expected to be more efficient, effective and accountable to customers; exhibit more proactive and entrepreneurial traits and virtues; and act aggressively, be task-oriented and develop a powerful and controlling identity (Leonard, 1998; Whitehead, 1998; Blackmore & Sachs, 2007). This re-masculinised workplace appears to facilitate the continual domination of men in important positions and to exclude women and/or marginalise femininity (Blackmore, 2005; Chan, 2004a).

Men in a feminised teaching force

In response to the panic and campaigns, there has been a notable rise in another strand of studies that have changed the category of “male teachers” from invisible to visible (Smedley, 2007). Initially, studies were undertaken to explore the difficulties and challenges that male primary school teachers might experience in a feminised environment: they are not allowed to touch or cuddle children, to comfort or care for pupils, but are expected to take on physical tasks, dispense discipline and confront authority, with their final destination being management (Allan, 1993; DeCorse & Vogtle, 1997; King, 1998; Murray, 1996; Sargent, 2000). Increasingly more studies identify the need to problematise masculinity and critically examine the narratives of their interviewees. They examine how male teachers understand and enact the so-called “male role model”, how men project their gender under heteronormative surveillance, how men’s gendered identity management affects their pedagogical practices, and whether and how the

gender performance of different men contributes to the constructions of hegemonic masculinity among boys, thereby legitimising their misogynist behaviour and perpetuating sexist heterosexual norms (Francis, 2008; Francis & Skelton, 2005; Haase, 2008; Mills et al., 2008; Roulston & Mills, 2000). These studies have powerfully undermined the assumptions that male and female teachers are two homogeneous groups and are essentially different, as implied by the media and in government reports. Moreover, they offer us insights into the emotional investment, (discursive) strategies and social power that men sometimes use and wield when they negotiate their maleness, otherness, and difference (Chan, 2004b; Montecinos & Nielsen, 2004; Pullen & Simpson, 2009; Simons, 2004; Smedley, 2007; Sumison, 2000).

The proliferation of studies in these areas has certainly improved our understanding of the gendered cultures of primary teaching and the masculinities of male teachers. Nevertheless, in the current debate, despite the concern about the masculinisation of leadership (Lingard et al., 2009), there is relatively little research that critically examines the experiences and perspectives of male primary school principals, the successful minority who have made careers in a female-dominated occupation (Thornton & Bricheo, 2006). Cushman (2008), as one of the few exceptions, finds that male principals in New Zealand tend to rate “male role models” more highly than female principals, especially in providing sports leadership in rugby, and may thus unwittingly reinforce a hegemonic form of masculinity. When examining the complex identity constructions of male primary headteachers, Jones (2008) shows how these men gravitate towards the authority that their leadership positions provide and distance themselves from “inadequate men” – a stigma to which male student teachers are usually subject. These few studies clearly demonstrate the need to find out the views of male school leaders. Furthermore,

given that male primary principals are important decision makers in hiring staff, allocating jobs and designing and implementing school policies (Moreau et al., 2008), they warrant greater attention. Taking heed of the suggestions of Cushman (2008), Haywood and others (2005), this study is sensitive to the possible differences and local specificities between interviewees in Hong Kong and those in Western countries. Before presenting the findings, I will first outline the specific social context of Hong Kong and the methodology that frames the analysis.

Background and methodology

As in many developed and developing countries, the mass expansion of schooling in Hong Kong has led to a rising number of female primary school teachers, whose inclusion was to economise on educational expenditure (Drudy, 2008). Before the Second World War, primary teaching in colonial Hong Kong was a job predominantly carried out by men, both foreign and local, and this male domination was not questioned (Chan, 2002). Immediately after the war, Hong Kong underwent a process of reconstruction, and the rapid expansion of primary schooling by the colonial government was one of the city's remarkable developments. At that time, women teachers, who received only three-quarters of the salary of their male counterparts, were clearly preferred to aid the expansion of education. An informal discriminatory quota of two women to one man was operative when admitting students into the full-time programs of the Teachers' Training Colleges (Luk, 1990). In government and some grant-in-aid schools, the same ratio of one man to two women teachers was also adopted in employment policy (Marsh & Sampson, 1963). These various practices turned "primary school teaching from an untrained male occupation into a profession with a female majority" (Luk, 1990: 58). For instance, women constituted 42 per cent of the teaching force in 1949. This figure rapidly rose to 64 per cent in

1969 and then to 71 per cent in 1979, gradually stabilising at around 72 per cent to 78 per cent between 1980 and 2007 (Education and Manpower Bureau, 2007/8).

Although women teachers have become the numerical majority in primary teaching, the teaching hierarchy has remained male dominated, with men disproportionately occupying more senior positions than their female counterparts. In 1998, men made up only 23 per cent of primary school teachers, but accounted for about 60 per cent of principals (Choi, 2003). Only in recent years have we witnessed a steady rise in women principals, from 40 per cent in 1998 to over 50 per cent in 2007¹ (Education and Manpower Bureau, 2007/8). This rise has not captured much academic attention, but there are several plausible explanations for the phenomenon: the improvement of women's educational achievement has rendered them more qualified; the 1997 issue led to a sudden exodus of male heads, which opened up more possibilities; or, as experiences in other countries suggest (Moller, 2005; Franzen, 2005; Coleman, 2007), recent educational restructuring, which is well underway in post-1997 Hong Kong (Choi, 2005), might have resulted in new leadership requirements that have facilitated women's entry into leadership positions.

This is the context under which I launched my study. Although the reasons contributing to the rise in the number of women principals needs closer examination, it is equally important to gauge male principals' evaluations of the situation before another claim that the feminisation of primary school principals is gaining ground. In 2006-07, I conducted in-depth interviews with 12 male primary school principals, and interviewed some of them again in 2009-10. I was interested in knowing their career trajectories, their evaluations of female and male staff and their

understanding of the rise in female leaders within the context of educational restructuring. As an exploratory study, I restricted my interviewees to men who had worked in subsidised co-educational primary schools, which constitute 80 per cent of the primary sector in Hong Kong, and who had a similar number of years of leadership experience. With the help of a colleague who conducts regular training workshops for prospective principals, I obtained a list of 40 male participants who all became heads after 1997 and thus had more than five but less than ten years of experience as a principal in 2006. Twelve agreed to be interviewed. Although this group was relatively young in terms of their experience as heads, their age ranged from 40 to 60. About half of them (seven) were in their forties and the remaining five were in their fifties, including one who was almost 60. All but one were married, and ten of them had one or two children. As the sample was generated for both theoretical and practical purposes, it was far from representative. My analysis and discussions are exploratory in nature and intended to promote more research in this area.

I conducted semi-structured interviewing sessions in the offices of the male principals. Each interview lasted for about 2 to 5 hours. With consent, all interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. As there were more than 400 pages of transcription, only parts of them were translated into English. To protect the anonymity of the interviewees, pseudonyms were used and some personal particulars have been altered.

Informed by post-structuralist feminist studies (Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Talbot, 1999; Weedon, 1997), this study does not see the identities/masculinities of male principals as essential entities. Instead, they are understood as ongoing projects in which individuals have to draw on the

discourses, multiple and conflicting, available in the contexts in which they are located to construct recognizable and respectable selves in a predominantly female workplace (Francis, 2008; Haywood, Popoviciu, and Mac an Ghail, 2007; Mills et al., 2008; Pullen & Simpson, 2009; Smedley, 2007). My analysis thus treats the interview data as the discursive practices of men who, actively but not always consciously, negotiate gender differences, assert their masculinity and distance themselves from femininity in a female-dominated workplace in the specific historical context of Hong Kong. I examine not only what the male principals said, i.e., their interpretive frameworks, but also their “narrative strategies” (Chase, 2005), such as how they said things, including their use of metaphors, images, comparisons, inconsistencies, and contradictions (see also Allard, 2004). In other words, the emphasis is not so much on identifying the existence of gender stereotypes or sexist bias, but on the social and political functions that (gendered) discourses are used to fulfil and the consequences that these may engender (Gough, 1998; Lazar, 2005; Pullen & Simpson, 2009). In the following, I delineate the interpretive frameworks of the twelve male primary school principals, especially how they make sense of their career, teaching staff and leadership.

Glass escalator, careerism or work commitment?

As mentioned earlier, a gendered hierarchy persists in many primary schools (Moreau et al., 2007). Studies have shown that male teachers, although a minority in the teaching profession, experience the “glass escalator effect” in their careers (Williams, 1995), as they benefit from the assumptions that as men they have enhanced leadership skills or a careerist attitude to work (Simpson, 2004). Willingly or otherwise, they are fast-tracked to, or are even under pressure to seek, promotion (Sargent, 2000; Coleman, 2002). Yet, men might not always acknowledge that

gender is an advantage in their careers (Thornton & Bricheno, 2006). In my study, some men also realised they had good chances of career advancement in primary teaching, but hardly any seemed to think their gender has given them any benefit. If gender mattered to them, it was only when they wanted to differentiate and distance themselves from their “less committed female colleagues”.

Principal Ng was the eldest interviewee at nearly 60 years of age. He became a principal when he was in his mid-50s, although his career started much earlier. He was promoted to an acting Assistant Master position (a senior position; AM hereafter) two years after he joined the school, when he was only twenty-two. He recounted his early success in this way.

Ng: Two years after I joined the school, I was asked to be an AM. I was only twenty-two at that time! When the school gave me such a good opportunity, I worked really hard and proved myself.

A: Why were you promoted so early?

Ng: *The principal was looking for a man.* He wanted someone who was able to control the students. He was looking for a disciplinary master who could be loud in voice, and I fitted well with his criteria. In my years of teaching, I had no problem in disciplining students and could control them naturally. I sometimes helped my colleagues to discipline their pupils. I seemed to have a natural ability in disciplining. (Italics added)

When a position is designated as belonging to men, or expected to be filled by a man with a particular type of masculinity, women are easily excluded (Acker, 1990). Although Principal Ng noticed that he was fast-tracked to a position that was tailor-made for a man, he did not question

this but accepted the preconceived job requirement and went on to assert his natural ability for disciplining and his willingness to prove his worth. Apparently, he enjoyed the patriarchal dividends (Connell, 1995) without realizing the structural inequalities of gender.

Principal Fung was one of the few men who were conscious of his gender when relating his career trajectory:

I stayed in the first school for five years, and then left because its educational ideals were different from mine. I changed to a Christian school later and was much happier as our values were closer. I gave myself totally to my students and was selfless in my job. *I am a man...* [pauses for a short while]. At that time most women teachers had families; they were not very concerned about promotion and were not eager to give more to school. *As I am a man*, I was willing to spend more time on school, so I was promoted to AM a year later. (Italics added)

“I am a man” was mentioned twice in Fung’s accounts. Fung might have used this to assert that he was a “real man” to me – the woman interviewer. He might also have wanted to suggest that he was a careerist. Yet in his elaboration, instead of projecting himself as ambitious and career-minded, he presented himself as someone who was willing to spend more time at school, and contrasted himself with women teachers who were family-oriented, less concerned about promotion and did not give more to the school. In other words, when explaining the “glass escalator effect” in his career, Fung presented his job commitment rather than his gender as a reason for his promotion. By using the discourse of “work commitment”, promotion becomes dependent on the willingness of an individual to become *selfless* and to do more. As women teachers have family responsibilities, they are seen as *less concerned* about their career

development and planning and as *not eager* to give more to their work. Implicit in this discourse is also the idea that only women are gendered beings who have family responsibilities, whereas men are non-gendered and can thus be selfless at work.

Principal Po became a principal in his early 30s. When I asked about his career trajectory, he was very upbeat and spoke eloquently for almost 20 minutes about his “impressive performance”.

My first school was rather famous in that area but honestly teachers there were not very hardworking. I remembered the senior teachers (AMs) all left school very early. The school finished at 1 pm, but the AMs had already taken out their handbags by 12:45 pm. They were all tai-tais who played mahjong after school. At that time I was a newcomer but worked very hard every day. I stayed until 2 or 3 pm and sometimes until 7 pm, as I wanted to do more for the kids. My hard work actually invited criticism from colleagues; they thought I was after promotion . . . Gradually, I was able to win everyone’s respect, as all my classes did very well. My principal was very impressed by my work so I was promoted in 1990.

Po used the discourse of work commitment to explain his quick promotion, and highlighted his effort, willingness to spend time with students and job performance as reasons for his successful career. It is also worth noting the ways in which he discussed work commitment. Not only did he present himself as a maverick who worked his way up and earned people’s respect to advance his career, but he also, similar to Fung, used married women as a contrast to himself. Nevertheless, this time female colleagues were denigrated not so much as being family-oriented but as *tai-tais*. In the context of Hong Kong, “tai-tai” is used to refer to a wife with lots of leisure time who presumably has a wealthy husband to support her. However, the term becomes derogatory when

a woman worker is called “tai-tai”. She is criticised as being uncommitted as she cares less about her job. Po asserted that his promotion was well deserved by differentiating himself from lazy tai-tais – the irresponsible senior female teachers – who indulged in self-pleasure (playing mahjong). Interestingly, this negative and even misogynist attitude towards married women teachers persisted when he talked about his current senior female staff:

In the last two years, I have found that several women teachers no longer share my conviction and are unwilling to sacrifice to the same extent as I do. After they married, they suddenly became very family oriented, and their babies were of utmost importance. After work, they wanted to return home as soon as possible and could not stay late. Maybe it is true, and I really don't know . . . They are AMs; they are supposed to take up more administrative duties and attend more staff meetings. This is their job and they applied for promotion. They have simply become lazier. I really don't know what to say to them.

We can easily detect Po's frustration and even resentment towards the “lazy” married female teachers in this quote. Although he said he struggled to make sense of their change of heart, he still judged them. Obviously Po did not think his senior staff should allow their family responsibilities to interfere with their work commitments. They should have known their job nature well and made no complaints because “they applied for promotion”. Po apparently did not see family responsibility as a change of life course that any gendered worker, whether female or male, has to balance and an issue that a family friendly workplace must address. He was probably unaware that given current gender relationships, women are likely to have a double burden (Ng, Ng, & Chan, 2009). Instead, he used the neo-liberal discourse of the committed worker (Francis, 2008; Moreau et al., 2007) to interpret the slack performance of his female staff,

and was disappointed that they had allowed family responsibilities to intrude into school business.

Men are better disciplinarians and women are more meticulous

As discussed in the literature review, concerns over boys' underachievement at school have led some countries to actively recruit more male teachers to primary teaching to provide male role models for boys (Cushman, 2008; Mills et al., 2004). In Hong Kong, there has been concern about boys' "underachievement" in the media and among some academics and parents, but no concerted effort has been made to recruit more men (Choi, 2006). When I asked the principals about their hiring preferences, most said that they considered not gender but the "heart", or the commitment, of a teacher. This gender-neutral "good teacher" discourse is actually what feminists try to advocate (Skelton, 2009). However, as the interviews progressed, a particular gender was clearly preferred on certain occasions. For instance, Principal Chan stated that he preferred male teachers when the sex ratio became too lop-sided:

I only consider gender when male teachers are getting too few, and this is for the benefit of students. When counselling students, it is always better to have both women and men teachers, as some boys may not want to talk to women. When there are very naughty students, it will also be easier to maintain order if a man is around. If he is a PE teacher, the control can be even better. *Women teachers have their constraints.* It is very true that after they are married and have given birth, they have to take care of their families. They naturally and inevitably can spare less time. A PE teacher has many activities and training after school, and if she spends too much time on these, she may neglect her family. (Italics added)

Although Chan said that he only wanted to hire men to maintain an acceptable sex ratio, his elaboration seemed to go beyond his initial intention. Apart from providing counselling to boys, he also wanted male teachers to maintain order and to be PE teachers, as they are less “constrained” than women teachers. Embedded in this ideal of “PE-cum-disciplinary master” are some common normative assumptions expected of male staff in primary teaching – men are always expected to be good at sports, to dispense discipline, especially to control difficult boys, and to be willing to take up extra-school activities. As is well discussed in the literature, these normative expectations are likely to encourage or even force men to engage in hegemonic masculinity when disciplining, and to alienate those who do not (Haase, 2008; King, 1998; Mills et al., 2008; Sargent, 2000). One needs to be cautious of the dangerous effects of normalising this particular type of masculinised disciplinary approach. When men and male PE teachers are seen as better disciplinarians because of the greater strength and power that they embody, this seems to validate the use of physical force in disciplining, which is likely to marginalise other forms of behaviour management, especially those used by women teachers (Chan, 2004b; Lingard et al., 2009).

Nevertheless, in Hong Kong there are also circumstances where female teachers are preferred.

Fung: I have no gender preference in hiring. I don't see male teachers as necessarily better. In fact it is only right to have more female primary teachers, as they are more meticulous, gentler and better at communication, whether with students or with parents. I have attended all of the classes in this school and all the best teachers are women. Men are less meticulous. I am also a man, so I know the limits of what we can do when it comes to teaching.

Yeung: I won't purposely recruit more men. I was a secondary teacher before. When I came to primary teaching, I noticed that the lower forms, like P1, actually required a completely different skill. I made a clear request to my principal that I would teach only the higher forms. Primary teaching, especially the lower forms, *involves a lot of trivia*, so you can see why there are more female teachers. The situation is only better when it comes to headship. (Italics added)

Using their own experiences for reference, these principals commented that women teachers are better teachers and more suitable for primary teaching, and thus their predominance is justified. At first, their remarks look favourable to women, who have an edge over male teachers. However, the discourse of "meticulous women" needs further unpacking.

Feminists in the West have been wary of the discourse of "caring" as it can easily essentialise women and be used to devalue their labour (Ackers, 1994); one also needs to scrutinise the uses and effects of "meticulous women" – a specific discourse in Hong Kong. Not only does this discourse essentialise women as meticulous by nature, just as the "strong male disciplinarian" concept has done to men, but a closer examination also shows that the links between meticulousness, the ability to handle trivia and teaching the lower forms may also be normalised, which has undesirable effects on women. Obviously the conflation femininises meticulousness as a female characteristic and teaching the lower forms as "women's work", but more importantly it also *trivialises* them. Therefore, when Yeung said that he avoided the lower forms, it is possible that it was because he was not as meticulous as women, but it is equally likely that he did not want to handle trivia and wanted to aim for something more important, such as the higher forms and even headship. In other words, the conflation can be used by men to stay away from teaching the lower forms and to justify their concentration on assignments and positions that they deem

are not “women’s work” and thus not trivial. At the same time, the assignment of meticulous women teachers to teach the lower forms, which is seen to “involve a lot of trivia”, helps explain why this job is also seen as less prestigious, less powerful and has fewer promotion chances (Coleman, 2002; Thornton & Bricheno, 2006). Moreover, as the next section shows, “meticulousness” can be used to discredit women’s leadership.

Women principals are C-grade leaders

In the last ten years in Hong Kong, there has been a slow but steady increase in the number of women principals in primary schools. I asked the male principals for their evaluation of this rise.

Chan: Hong Kong is a good place where men and women are equal. If there is an opportunity and if you have ability, you can simply move up.

Fung: Unlike those in the past, women nowadays tend to marry later, and some of them don’t even want to have children, so they have more time to be involved at work. In my generation, most women were married and had children; they did not have time for school.

Fok: In the past men were more ambitious, whereas women simply wanted to be teachers; their focus was on their family, so they were not keen about administrative work. They did not bother to compete. Now things have changed. There are more principals who are single women, and want career development.

Luk: In the past men who taught PE, most of them in fact, would be promoted to be principals. This was tacit knowledge. We are now civilised. We choose leaders according to their ability to

organise, mobilise and socialise. Men and women are equal now. If you are a woman and can demonstrate that you are rational, people can tell.

In these accounts, two reasons are cited to explain women's improved access to senior positions: "women and men in Hong Kong are equal now" and "women teachers have improved". Both seem to assume that women can have it all if they try harder. In fact, in the view of these male principals, when women are able to overcome their own "obstacles" by becoming more qualified, getting married later, staying single, bearing fewer or no children, focusing more on career development, and demonstrating themselves to be rational, they can ascend the career ladder. Luk was one of the few principals who identified a change of criteria in leadership, in that the once male-dominated criteria are being replaced by more objective considerations. Nevertheless, this sanguine opinion not only remains a minority view, but is also quickly overshadowed when the leadership style of women principals is discussed.

Whether female and male principals have different leadership and management styles is an important discussion in the literature (Blackmore, 1999; Shakeshaft, 1987). Recent studies have warned about simplification of gender differences and the danger of essentialising women and men (Collard & Reynolds, 2005; Reay & Ball, 2000). While these differences are certainly contentious, the subjective evaluations of individuals towards the issue matter, as they reveal their conceptions of gender differences. In fact, a common difference asserted by the male principals interviewed was that women and men have different and distinctive management styles.

Law: Their styles are different. Women principals are more meticulous, if I put it nicely. If I don't, I will say they fail to think big . . . They sometimes waste too much time on petty things and become narrow-minded. Men in general are not like this. They seem to see things longer term. They are more relaxed, more easy-going, less fastidious and more tolerant. It is probably fair to say that both have their own strengths and weaknesses. As men sometimes focus only on the big picture, they may overlook some minor details.

Luk: Women are usually more meticulous, better at details, although there are some exceptions. In primary school, if a principal manages her school by attending to every detail, she can produce results quickly. However, when she is too meticulous, she makes her staff passive. Men are broader in perspective; their style tends towards leadership. It also depends on the requirements of the school. When the situation requires, men can be meticulous too.

In the previous section, “women are more meticulous” was a justification for the concentration of female teachers in the lower forms in primary schools. When principalship was discussed, this once “positive quality” was re-evaluated and degraded as “pettiness”, “fastidiousness”, narrow-mindedness and rigidity. Meticulousness in school management is seen more as an organisational hazard, as it renders teaching staff passive. Furthermore, although both the principals quoted above tried to suggest that women and men have their own strengths and weaknesses, they did not present gender differences in leadership styles as different and equal but dichotomous and hierarchical. Small versus big, petty-minded versus broad minded or long-termist, fastidious versus tolerant, details versus direction – the first part of each pair, which are described as the characteristics of women’s leadership style, are obviously inferior to the characteristics associated with men. Alongside these dichotomous pairs is the differentiation from and subordination of management to leadership and the gendering of management as

feminine and leadership as masculine. This idea is vividly revealed in the narrative of Principal Fok:

Women principals are pickier, more meticulous, more systematic and tidier. Men principals, like me, are messier, just look at my table (laugh). We are not so tidy. We are broader. I personally think a woman principal can manage a school very well, but that's why teachers usually don't like them. They control too much and want to be involved in everything. Men principals do not control that much. If my goal of being a principal is just to manage a school well, then the room for improvement is very small. If you are thinking of building a great school, you should lead by providing direction . . . Many Hong Kong principals nowadays have this attitude: they think if they can manage a school well, their school is a successful one. Their level is actually very low. If you love your country, you should aim at being a great school leader. If you manage a school well, keep it tidy and orderly, I think this is a C-grade principal.

Fok obviously does not have a very high opinion of meticulous women principals, regarding them as micro-managers who are over-controlling and stagnant in nature. To him, great leadership is different. It is more focused on building a school and providing direction, and is nationalistic (as it contributes to the well-being of the country). It is important to note the masculine connotations that Fok asserted and the distancing of great leadership from the meticulous management of women principals. In this presentation, the hierarchical values of feminine management and masculine leadership are established. Apparently, women might have overcome their “inadequacies” and become school principals, but their effectiveness as leaders is still questioned; at best, they are rated by some as “C-grade principals”.

Conclusion

This small qualitative study of twelve principals does not imply that all male principals in Hong Kong necessarily share these views; its purpose is to contribute to the existing debate on the feminisation of primary teaching by critically interrogating the interpretive frameworks of a relatively under-researched group. In the closing paragraphs, I would like to highlight two significant aspects.

Feminist studies have successfully shown how male teachers' identity constructions impact on their pedagogical practices and produce harmful effects on boys, girls and female teachers; this study also reveals feminising and masculinising processes that male principals may engender through narrative strategies. For instance, their subjective evaluations of women teachers as more meticulous and men as better disciplinarians are not simply gender stereotypes, but have the effects of feminising the teaching of the lower forms as "women's work" and masculinising discipline as a male preserve. More importantly, these discourses trivialise the job nature of the former and normalise the use of physical force by the latter, thus imposing differential and even hierarchical values on different tasks. Male principals have used these discourses to lay claim to positions tailored made for men and to stay away from teaching the lower forms when they were teachers. As they were not aware of these and were not challenged, it is very likely that as principals they will further reinforce and promote gender inequalities through their hiring and job allocation practices.

This study also reveals the need to closely examine the narrative strategies and mundane talk of male principals and to delineate the subtle operations of power in reproducing gender

inequalities. Although previous studies have usefully illuminated how discourses of patriarchy, misogyny, homophobia, heteronormativity and hegemonic masculinity in primary teaching reproduce gender inequalities, the interpretive frameworks of the male principals interviewed in this study were not always blatantly patriarchal and misogynist. Indeed, the discourses that they used to make sense of their career trajectories or evaluate their teaching staff may look gender-neutral or even advantageous to women. For instance, the discourse of “meticulous women” seems to favour women; only when the assumptions, functions and effects of this discourse are examined that we see how it can trivialise and discredit women’s labour. Similarly, the discourse of “work commitment” may look innocent. However, as it puts emphasis on *individual* efforts and prioritises work over family, it easily positions female teachers as uncommitted gendered workers who are burdened by family responsibilities. When male principals subscribe to this discourse, it is more likely that they will become resentful of women’s “laziness” as they expect women to overcome their “own” obstacles rather than enacting more family-friendly and gender-fair policies in schools.

Obviously, if gender equity in primary teaching is to be achieved, it becomes exigent that not only male teachers but also school leaders should (re)examine their beliefs and discourses of gender differences, together with the effects that these may produce. In other words, male principals should be made aware that the ways they embody and understand gender can consciously or otherwise, overtly or covertly, reproduce, create and transform gender inequalities in the workplace.

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Note

1. It should be noted that the percentage of female principals who were headmaster/headmistress I, i.e., principals heading a school with 24 classes or over and receiving a higher salary, was 51.9 per cent, and the percentage of those who were headmaster/headmistress II was 52.2 per cent in 2007 (Education and Manpower Bureau, 2008). Apparently, women principals, although increasing in number, tend to populate the less senior position.