

THEMATIC SECTION:  
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## Playing School: female elementary school teachers' stories of childhood games and post-feminist tomorrows

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**ABSTRACT – Playing School: female elementary school teachers' stories of childhood games and post-feminist tomorrows.** Not only do many little girls in the United States and elsewhere *play school*, but when they grow up, they sometimes become teachers, at which point the story of *playing school* takes on a new narrative and discursive function. Using narrative and performance theories, and discourse analysis, we analyze stories about *playing school* told as part of a multi-site qualitative study of new and pre-service American elementary teachers' life histories. We examined these narratives with one eye on pop culture and mid to late 1990s girlhood, and the other on the use to which the game of *playing school* is put both discursively and in practice. Implications for teacher preparation and professional identity, as well as the gendered face of teachers' work, conclude the paper.

**Keywords: Gender. Preservice Teachers. Play. Life Histories. Elementary School.**

**RESUMO – Brincar de Escolinha: relatos de brincadeiras infantis de professoras dos anos iniciais do ensino fundamental e os amanhã pós-feministas.** Não apenas muitas garotinhas nos Estados Unidos e em outros lugares *brincam de escolinha*, mas, por vezes, ao crescerem, se tornam professoras, um ponto em que o relato de *brincadeiras se escolinha* assume uma nova função narrativa e discursiva. Por meio de teorias da narrativa e da performance e da análise de discurso, examinamos relatos de *brincadeiras de escolinha* contados como parte de um estudo qualitativo multilocal de histórias de vida de professoras norte-americanas dos anos iniciais do ensino fundamental graduadas recentemente e em formação. Analisamos estas narrativas com um olhar sobre a cultura pop e os tempos de menina a partir de meados da década de 1990 até seu final e outro sobre como o brincar de escolinha é colocado tanto em prática quanto discursivamente. Implicações para a preparação e a identidade profissional de professores, além da face sexista do trabalho docente, concluem o artigo.

**Palavras-chave: Gênero. Professores em formação. Brincadeira. Histórias de Vida. Ensino de anos iniciais do ensino fundamental.**

Madison and Lauren, both age seven, were lining up cardboard boxes on the floor of the basement playroom at Lauren's house. 'Put them in rows', said Madison, 'not tables, like, in rows so that they will pay attention to the teacher!' Both girls laughed. Lauren put one crayon on each desk. Madison sat in a kitchen chair, behind a larger box, in front of the rows with a stack of papers and a red crayon in her hand. The papers were her own work from her 2<sup>nd</sup> grade class, taken from her 'take-home' folder and repurposed for the game of 'Playing School'. She had on a dress-up dress from the toy box and a pair of sunglasses pushed up on her head. Lauren positioned teddy bears, dolls, and a stuffed elephant, one behind each box as 'students' for the class. 'Now, class', said Lauren, 'one-two-three all eyes on me'. The elephant fell behind its desk. Lauren pushed it back on top. Madison sighed, 'Oh, I have so many papers to grade', putting a big red mark at the top of each page. 'These are terrible!' Lauren said: 'These students are bad! No recess!' The girls laughed. Lauren's mother called them for snack. 'Let's go to the teacher's lounge for coffee!' said Madison, and off they went, leaving the elephant and his classmates alone, ostensibly punished, and awaiting further instruction.

## Introduction

If you as a reader are able to visualize and connect with this introductory vignette, it may not be as much a testament to our writing abilities as it is an indication of the pervasiveness of the game of *playing school*. You may have played this game yourself.

Not only do many little girls in the United States and elsewhere *play school*, but when they grow up, they sometimes become teachers, at which point the story of *playing school* takes on a new narrative and discursive function. Using narrative and performance theories, and discourse analysis, we analyze stories about *playing school* told as part of a multi-site qualitative study of new and pre-service American elementary teachers' life histories. We examined these narratives with one eye on pop culture and mid to late 1990s girlhood, and the other on the use to which the game of *playing school* is put. What are these stories accomplishing for the speakers and listeners? What do they communicate, and what do they keep us from knowing? The answers to these questions enable us to better understand the gendered expectations for girls who grow up to be women teachers, and the nuances of modern girls navigating the idea of work, of choices and gendered selves. The stories analyzed here constitute a representative subset of the larger corpus of study data (N = 72).

## Playing School and Storytelling

Mead's (1934) concept of *imaginative rehearsal*, describes the act of imaginatively taking on the role of another in order to *try it on* mentally and see how it would feel to be in that role. Before girls become teachers, they may imagine the possibility and begin to see and pretend themselves into that role. It is possible that this happens in phases, including both childhood *playing teacher* as well as more adult pursuits

like student teaching. However, for the purposes of these analyses, we are framing the childhood activity of *playing teacher* as very early, but very important, imaginative rehearsal – perhaps even a *dress rehearsal* – in which a girl tries on and begins to think about herself performing a new role in preparation for the possibility of assuming it. For young girls, we suggest, *playing teacher* is more than just a childhood game. It is rehearsal for an economic future with particular, gendered features.

It is in that future that study participants rely on their stories of *playing teacher* to evince their suitability for real teacher roles. Storytelling is relational; it calls on people to listen, share, and work toward understanding (Riessman, 2008). An oral storytelling of a personal narrative is an account of what happened; the storytelling event is “[...] structured by the culture in which it operates” (Langellier, 1989, p. 255) and uses discourse to portray or challenge personal or societal values within the narrative. Therefore, the meaning of the narrative and the storytelling performance extends beyond the person-to-person interaction to the sociocultural field in which the telling takes place.

### *Narrative as Performance*

The content of the narrative is also important because tellers draw it from a sociocultural and often historic field, as they depict what happened in a certain time and place. Yet the layer of the oral storytelling of personal narratives offers the opportunity for speakers to “[...] create a possible world” using the “[...] license to create an account of something that happened” (Langellier, 1989, p. 255) in the way that the speaker wants the listener to hear it, which is then subject to the listener’s evaluation. Important to this study, through this storytelling performance “[...] informants do not reveal an essential self as much as they perform a preferred one, selected from the multiplicity of selves or personas that individuals switch among as they go about their lives” (Riessman, 2008, p. 337). Though some may see these performances as speaker’s manipulating stories for their benefit, we contend that these preferred identities are worthy of study because they are steeped in the values and beliefs that the speakers do or hope to embody.

### *Play as Embodied Performance*

Narratives of *playing school* provide a focal point as to the actual or wishful performed embodiment of identity, particularly of teacher. As Mead’s (1934) concept of *imaginative rehearsal* suggests, the process of attaining a professional identity lies not only in education and training, but also in the act of imaginatively taking on the work role in order to *try it on* to see how it feels. For many young women, some of the first imaginative rehearsal of future economic life is the common game of *playing school* when they are young girls, and their female primary level teachers are often one of few, if any, professional women’s lives into which they have everyday exposure sufficient to incite imaginative

rehearsal. Of course, school, and thus *playing school*, is a concept girls likely encounter in real-life classrooms, as well as in a wider culture of media and products, making a wide field of interest for the discourse of what it means to be a teacher.

### Playing School in Popular Girl Culture and 1990s Girl Culture in the United States

The story of *playing teacher* is both a product of nostalgia and a popular cultural model present in the media and girl culture of the 1990s<sup>1</sup>. These media images draw on a surprisingly limited range of gendered teacher tropes. After all, the *teacher* is a stock character that appears again and again in cultural stories, and certainly figures prominently in young girls' lives in the US.

Images of female teachers in American popular culture paint a common, and exhausted, literary ideal of womanhood: the virgin and the whore, or, as McWilliam (1996, p. 4) puts it, the *schoolmarm* or the *seductress* where the choice is to be a “[...] predictable, loving caricature...giving, nagging, [enacting] self-denial” or something more dangerous, like the overtly feminine, sexual, seductive and transgressive. But to be a good teacher, or at least to play the game of teacher, we found that none of our participants mentioned acting out being the seductress or the spinster schoolmarm. Rather, they sought a third way, as while popular culture offered up spinsters and seductresses, the toy industry offered the *schoolmistress* (Galman, 2012).

The schoolmistress is attractive, but not desirous. She is young, pretty and nice, and focused primarily on nurturing children. She waits in the classroom for marriage and family of her own. Also, significantly, she is without the stigma of age and still open to securing a husband, unlike the schoolmarm. Also, unlike the seductress, she is no threat to masculinity. The schoolmistress is the *correct* performance of the ideal feminine. The grade schoolteacher, Miss Marquez, played by Jennifer Lopez in the 1996 film, *Jack*, is attractive and kind (and rarely seen teaching) and spends the entire film ministering to the emotional needs of her students. In Dahl's (1988) *Matilda* of film (1996), the character performing the obvious valued identity, Miss Honey, is kind and attractive, sexually unconscious, with the innocence (and, one should note, the powerlessness) of a child. In this way she is, ostensibly, more able to minister to the needs of children, being herself almost a child.

These themes are certainly in step with research on young women and girls' beliefs about what constitutes a *good* teacher. The good teacher, in their eyes, is obviously within the Schoolmistress trope, and rehearsing one's performance of this kind of teacher – for both child and adult – is irrevocably tied to ideal femininity (Galman, 2012). As Weinstein (1989) found, when pre-service teachers are asked to describe a *good* teacher, the top five categories of consensus echo Mahalik et al. (2005) top Western Feminine Norms: being caring, understanding, warm, friendly and relating to or liking children. Intelligence, pedagog-

ical knowledge or abilities, political acumen and similar did not appear in Weinstein's top categories. This certainly corresponds with many of our pre-service study participants' beliefs that good teachers' most important skills are innate and gendered: they had to nurture their students and be able to attend to the children's affective needs in a sweet, caring way, and that these skills came most easily to women – and they have very little to do with the actual work of the teacher. Pedagogy, for example, seems secondary.

Teacher educators also acknowledged the dominance of the school-mistress archetype as the valued identity for their students. As Meiners (2002, p. 89) writes, the persistence of images of *Lady Bountiful* fulfill this trope:

On the first day of class, I routinely ask everyone to 'briefly introduce yourself and to tell the class a little something about why you are here' – an exercise I always found so painful yet I now replicate, for convention. Invariably, the majority of the female students in my classes begin to evoke the same figure. This lady – the future elementary teacher – has always loved children. Her mother, her husband or boyfriend (even strangers in the streets) have remarked upon her natural aptitude with children and small animals. She is gracious, nurturing, often soft-spoken, and is usually married (or engaged). The words money, career, union, labor, or even job are rarely mentioned – leaving listeners with the impression that she does not need to rely solely on her income as a teacher to survive. For her, teaching is a calling or a vocation, and she has always known that she wanted to be a (elementary school) teacher.

The work itself is absent. Most, if not all, media images of teaching rarely, if ever, show teachers in the act of teaching (Gunderson; Haas, 1987). Teachers in the media simply seldom teach, quite possibly because becoming/being a teacher in the common cultural stories has more to do with the individual than the *act* or *task* of teaching, or because the myth that because people have watch teachers during compulsory schooling (Lortie, 1975) then everyone knows what teachers do. Thus, the showcasing the realities of teachers' work is deemed unnecessary. It is no surprise then, that participants' games of playing school rarely featured teaching – instead, it was mostly setup, followed by cookies in the teachers' lounge.

The vast majority of study participants followed the overall trend of pre-service elementary school teachers at that time, which is to say that they were more politically and socially conservative than their age mates in other college majors and trajectories (Galman, 2012). For this population, this included Protestant Christian religiosity, emphasis on virginity and heterosexuality, and a *post-feminist* orientation to their own gendered experience.

As noted earlier, for the period of data collection, these participants would have been elementary-aged children in the 1990s United

States, which was an era of economic prosperity that created the conditions for a generation of post-feminist claims around the irrelevance of feminism and the achievement of supposed equality (Douglas, 2010). Unlike the girls of the 1970s and 1980s, girls at play in the 1990s may have had wider and greater role models of powerful women beyond the mother and the teacher, even if they did not have daily access to those role models. This time was also the era of riot grrrls and Spice Girls, whose message of female power and liberation seemed to be everywhere, creating contradiction and confusion as girls evaluated media against a rapidly shifting girl culture. As Galman (2012, p. 179) writes, as the 1990s Girl Power:

[...] came to the pop culture fore, it promoted scrappy, do-it-yourself activism for girls and women, resistance to conspicuous consumption and, as laid out by the Oxford English Dictionary, 'power exercised by girls; specifically a self-reliant attitude among girls and young women manifested in ambition, assertiveness, and individualism'. The Girl Power discourse of the 1990s [...] evaporated and [was] replaced with a girl culture largely defined by 'post-feminist' rhetoric (Douglas, 2010). This rhetoric implies that as a global culture we are 'post-feminist' – to wit: we don't need feminism anymore and can go back to our regularly scheduled programming.

To further highlight the cultural clash and reorganization that made up the backdrop for girlhood among most participants, we must highlight that teacher games were, and are, intertwined with idealized femininity and the male gaze. A casual Internet search for *playing teacher* reveals not children's games but hyper-sexualized adult women in provocative poses. Not a far cry from the 1984 Van Halen hit, *Hot for Teacher*, the 1990s were full of the usual fare: Halloween costumes of sexy schoolgirls and teachers in stockings and plaid miniskirts.

While participants talked about making classrooms out of cardboard boxes, and if they were very fortunate having old papers to pretend to mark, today's girl can indulge with a variety of supported materials from toymakers. These include Melissa & Doug's *Schooltime* classroom play set, which comes with white board, eraser, markers, pattern blocks, stickers, activity cards, calendars and more. Featured prominently on the cover of the box is a young girl teaching a small boy. It is difficult to distinguish this toy set from actual teachers' supplies. Girls of the 1990s, however, had Teacher Barbie, a bespectacled beauty in red high heels, a red tie and white oxford shirt, and a dress covered in numbers, apples and rulers. She comes with an easel/chalkboard, a clock that provides the schoolhouse bell, and two infants to *teach*. What the infants will do with letters, numbers, and desks is an unanswered question. The infants appear as two males in many promotional images, but in actual packaging are male and female. The pupils are also the same race as the teacher (so, African American Teacher Barbie only comes in a package with African American infants – hinting that she may be both mother

and teacher to these babies, a conflation very near the mark). In promotional stills one can see the chalkboard reads, *We love Barbie*. As the infants are both too small to write and reach the chalkboard, this is doubtlessly self-promotion by Barbie herself. She also speaks, saying *Great job!* or *Try it again!* Whether this is directed to the infants, or again, to herself as an attempt at positive self-talk, remains unclear. This product was part of the *Barbie Careers* playset, wherein Barbie might also be purchased dressed as a firefighter<sup>2</sup>.

A Google Image search of *Kids playing teacher* reveals endless images of young girls teaching other children, including young boys, and adult women teaching children, but no images of male children teaching other young children, as well as lots of sexually suggestive images of young women as *sexy teachers* (Johnson, 2005) or similar. Teaching, even play teaching, seems to be fraught with gender politics, desire and worked out under the male heterosexual gaze.

### **Methodology: discourse analysis to make sense of narratives**

This paper analyzes stories about *playing school* told as part of a multi-site qualitative study of new and pre-service American elementary teachers' life histories. The narratives included here are considered representative of particular themes and trends found across the sites at large University teacher education programs in the Northeast, Southwest and Southeast United States. Participants included in these analyses were either in the final year of elementary teacher preparation coursework and doing full-time student teaching or were in the first year of their professional practice as working elementary school teachers. All participants were young women under the age of 25 and white, and while there were men in the larger sample, they constituted fewer than 5 of the total participant pool and are not included in the primary analyses here. Interview data were collected between 2004 and 2012 across the three institutions and analyzed collectively here.

After we conducted life history interviews with participants, we employed discourse analysis techniques to examine the data. Taking Riessman's (2008, p. 107) call to "[...] interrogate particular words, listen for voices of minor characters, identify hidden discourses, speakers take for granted, and locate gaps and indeterminate sections in personal narratives", we used discourse analysis as a way to see the ideologies, the system of assertions, active in the narratives. Discourse is a way to see that ideology is active. In turn, maintaining the discourse keeps the ideology thriving. In this way discursive analysis of the personal narratives provides an avenue to examine the wider sociocultural scope within the individuals' narratives, the general as well as the specific (Barbre, 1989).

Ideology and discourse recursively feed each other, but the symbiotic relationship is not without fault. There are times when discourse and ideology temporarily separate and the interaction between the two is less than seamless. Here the discourse may feel forced. Aspects of a



discourse that do not seem to rationally fit together but are accepted anyway are signs that the ideology is operating to mask those irrationalities. The relationship of discourse and ideology is quite complicated to see, so analyzing these points of disconnection, where the rules of the discourse and the momentum of the ideology are incongruent, is useful instead of assuming some absolute truth is at work. Discontinuities, however, simply become interesting points for analysis; they do not cause the entire system to crumble.

### **The Economics of Playing Teacher**

For participants, their desire to teach manifested first in pretend play: the overwhelming majority told stories about lining up stuffed animals, boxes, even chairs or laundry baskets and *leading* a class as a pretend teacher. The *work* of the teacher was mostly related to paperwork and encouraging imaginary charges to behave (and often punishing them with harsh words), but it was a very innocent, early imagination of what the work of the teacher is, informed largely by the child's own teachers and schools. One participant said,

I've wanted to be a teacher since my first day of Kindergarten. When I was little, I used to play school in my basement by myself and I had this massive classroom setup with a chalkboard and everything. And I'd go down there and pretend I was the teacher. Um, I made lesson plans and attendance sheets and I really liked all the paperwork – it made me feel official [...] teaching has always been a passion and I just know it is what I want to do (Ashley, age 21, White).

It is important to note here that almost without exception these White, female participants could and did tell identical stories describing when they first thought about becoming a teacher.

One participant, who reflected on grading her stuffed animals' *assignments*, spent all of her allowance at the teacher supply store:

I was telling my mentor teacher yesterday, I'd come home from school and play school. Like in elementary school [...] I had quite the little set-up in my parents' house. The chalkboard and the whiteboard and the desk and all kinds of stuff (McKenzie, 23, White).

The matter of spending money on teacher supplies raises the question of who is legitimized as a teacher-to-be. Though play materials can be inventive and open as one's imagination, a clear point of McKenzie's story is that she used her own allowance money to buy supplies at a real school supply store. She offered this as both evidence of her commitment to the profession at an early age as well as proof of the seriousness of her teacher play. Two disconnections are worthy of note.

First, the juxtaposition of the seriousness in play goes beyond the oft-cited quotes from developmental specialists such as Piaget, Montessori, and Spock with the idea that a child's play is the child's work. The sentiment in this narrative is that the intensive engagement in McKen-



zie's basement was her first job training, and she was her own supervisor. Playing school was not simply grasping developmental skills to operate more adeptly in the world; it was her practice for a profession and incorporated Mead's (1934) concept of *imaginative rehearsal*.

Second, McKenzie stressed the use of her own allowance money to invest in her kid-play, retrospectively for an adult future. The legitimacy this lent her play and the purpose of her narrative (i.e., to demonstrate her commitment to teaching) was undeniable; however, considering the overwhelming middle-class designation of most teachers, we cannot deny the recursive economic structures in place that maintain the teaching profession as a middle-class endeavor. In this case, McKenzie's family is wealthy enough to give her an allowance and has transportation to drive her to the school supply store. McKenzie is financially secure enough to spend that money on playthings, instead of necessities like food or clothes. As McKenzie got older, she was able to go to a four-year university to earn her bachelor's degree toward a profession that paid less in salary than some alternatives open to her generation and perhaps less than the cost of her education itself. McKenzie's financial safety nets are apparent making teaching a viable option for her. As more lower-middle and lower class individuals are shying from teaching, it raises issue that although all children are capable of playing school, perhaps there are some children who are capable of playing school more legitimately than others, negating the common sentiment that children's play is only limited by their imaginations.

### *Gentle Nurturer or Harsh Disciplinarian*

Almost without exception the female participants told stories like the ones above when speaking about self-as-teacher. Common features associated with the game of *playing teacher*, involved young girls, by themselves or with friends, setting up a classroom, doing paperwork, and engaging in imaginative rehearsal around being the teacher. All participants played games as young girls where they enacted the *teacher* as both loving and a disciplinarian. As one young woman describes, playing teacher had very little to do with the work of being the teacher as much as realizing a desired role:

Sure, I played teacher like all the little girls did – setting up desks with my stuffed animals and dolls, dressing up in my mother's clothes and correcting pretend papers – what we really did was punish our students and pretend that they were talking to their neighbor and not doing their work! Of course, we had no idea what we were doing, but it was fun. At one point I even had a chalkboard with real chalk and we'd get covered in the dust. It made my house the place to play!

Annie describes *playing teacher* in similar terms, however rather than having stuffed animals or cardboard boxes stand in as teachers, she has her friends stand in as the naughty children – though it was a short-lived strategy.

I would be the teacher and my friends would be the students and I would make them sit in rows and I would discipline them. It was more like doing what I said and then it turned out to be not so fun and they wouldn't want to play that game. But, um, when I was little we saw teaching as making people sit in rows telling them what to do – the idea came from TV or something – probably – because my teachers in the classroom were all really nice. In addition to television, we had a need to be in control and it's not the kind of thing you get when you're little, so in playing teacher I was like 'I want people to be paying attention to me' how do I keep them paying attention? 'Be quiet! Don't do that!' You know. That was one of the first things you go to, just being bossy or whatever so that you can get them to do what you want them to do.

The tension between enacting the teacher as mothering nurturer or strict disciplinarian is a gendered matter that, whether the young girls were aware, would follow them into their professions. Responding to what then was a male-dominated profession, Beecher (1846, p. 10) called on women to take up teaching as a way to affect social change, as well as to prepare for being wives and mothers, as teaching is the epitome of “[...] all that is good, and wise, and lovely”.

Annie wisely, if not naively, named the quandary when she described that despite all her teachers as being nice, she sought something else in her play: *'I want people to be paying attention to me' how do I keep them paying attention?* To be nurturing, to be good and wise and lovely does not mean others will take you seriously. Annie, even as a child, realized that some people (e.g., children, nice women teachers) get ignored. Maher and Tetrault (2001) support add to this, stating that a female teacher who does not wish to be totalitarian is always negotiating between her authority and guiding students to develop their own expertise and capabilities, putting the teacher in a bind. Therefore, as Annie's narrative on play reveals, succeeding as nurturers risks women teachers labeled wimpy; claiming authority jeopardizes the game, and because a teacher is dependent on her students, ending the game also risks the young girl's teacher identity.

### *Naturalness or Social Construction of Women Teachers*

The assumption is that women are prone to mothering and nurturing children and thus are better suited to the work of teaching. Participants' narratives display this assumption.

It was just kind of natural for me to do it [...] When I was little [family members] all told me I was a mother type, or I'd be a teacher. It just kind of felt like the natural profession for me, I always tried to take care of the little kids on the playground when I was playing when I was little. I would find a little three-year-old and help them down the slide or push them on the swings or something. So, I've always been interested in kids since I was a kid myself. I read those books, *The Teenage Babysitters*, and I really wanted to be a babysitter when I was little. When I was 12 I started babysitting. I babysat all through high school, it was the only job I had. I had a lot of babysitting jobs and I just got to know families really well (Meghan, age 20, white).

However, upon examination of the discourses involved, we are able to see the sociocultural influences on young girls that are separate from natural progression. For example, in Meghan's narrative, she cites family members, younger children, literature, and other families who shape her professional direction. Meghan proposed that these sociocultural factors supported a natural tendency that was already present, and thus the narrative serves her purpose in demonstrating she is a natural teacher, yet the same story elements could have been used to show that a tendency was realized only because it was fostered in her childhood by other influences. Regardless, Meghan narrated the former and did others who often stressed their suitability for teaching due to their own child-like qualities.

While some participants explained their play as extending into childcare work, other participants commented on maintaining child-like characteristics as a gift that pointed the way to teaching as a logical career choice. Susannah, age 21, said she *just knew* that she would be a good teacher for young children:

I can just – uh – there's a lot of people out there who have a really hard time connecting with kids and I can connect with them. I can teach them, and I can also be their friend and be on the same level with them, so I know how to tell them how to get through this – I like littler kids.

When asked what the work of teaching was about, Susannah was admittedly a little unsure of what teachers did, exactly, every day. While she was aware of the large amounts of *paperwork* and *planning* as well as *discipline* she couldn't clearly elaborate beyond these general, structural elements. When she was a child, playing teacher, she typically did *paperwork*, filled out lesson plans, and disciplined unruly *children* in her imaginary class. *I'm not really sure [what the teacher does]*, she says, but, brightening, *While I'm not really doing what I'm going to do yet [...] I feel like how I'm going to feel when I am a teacher, and I like that.*

Though some interpretations of Susannah's comments would be that she was in a state of arrested development, failing to grow up and out of her childish ways and mindset, these participants see being child-like as justification for being teachers. Participant Kari (white, age 23) described herself as *child-like* in many ways, with academic strengths on par with an early elementary curriculum and said that being *just like a big kid myself* is a tremendous asset in connecting with and understanding children. When asked how being the teacher feels, Kari smiled, *I'm going to be the teacher everybody loves*. The teacher who everyone loves, she says, is typically *young* and *cool* and gentle, not unlike the Schoolmistress trope she described seeing on television.

Susannah and Kari may have valid points in that being child-like is helpful in being a teacher, though not necessarily for the reasons they give. Traditionally, U.S. schools are arranged in a harem-like style, where the majority of teachers are women who are under the *rule* of a single (historically) male administrator, who takes charge of the women because they are seen as incapable of governing themselves. Though

the increase in female administrators in recent years unsettles the traditional harem model, the schools of the 1990s in which these young ladies were educated, likely did follow suit, sending an expectation of infantilized female teachers in need of their own care by a more powerful and knowledgeable (male) other.

### *Can They Leave the Childish Things Behind for the Love of Teaching?*

Oddly, the tension noted earlier between Gentle Nurturer or Harsh Disciplinarian is eased by this third option, which is to maintain the childish play all together. If the girls are able to continually play at being teacher, which they trained for throughout childhood, they can avoid the realities of adulthood. It is important to note that these participants and others were not searching for a job, or really for a paycheck, but rather an identity. And we know that for young women leaving college and university settings to embark on the life of work, that identity is inextricably tied to the valued gender identity, and maintaining the moral career of the successful female who is powerful and competent yet still feminine and a desirable candidate for wife and mother. Rachel adds: *This may sound so antifeminist, but I do want to have kids and I do want to be able to stay home with them in the summer and I do want to have their vacations off. That is not the reason why I chose teaching, but it is a great bonus.* The narrative of the teacher as nurturer and biologically compelled – often with mixed and often unanticipated results (Grumet, 1988) – perhaps is allowed to live on as mother and model to their children the same gendered expectations.

Though the career options for U.S. women are more numerous and varied than when Beecher advocated for women as teachers, the expectation that women would consider teaching a training ground for motherhood is still evident. Indeed, a nurturing woman teacher is expected to be a nurturing mother (Lightfoot, 1978). One participant described her cohort of preservice teachers as *young and beautiful and all the children love us, and then we get married and stay home with our babies.* Such concepts about work-life balance and career trajectory are absent from narratives about playing school as youth, though it is the disjuncture between the precious ideal self-as-teacher constructed in memories of childhood and play and the realities of a teaching job prove unsettling.

### **Conclusion: men, rehearsals and side betting**

While they were few in number and not analyzed here, male participants in our studies never played teacher. This could be partially related to the performative complexities of boys' play versus girls' play, or the differences between futures envisioned in that play. While girls in the 1990s played games in which they were mothers caring for children, or put on wedding games in which they were brides, or played at being

teachers (who are typical loci of female power within that scope – the mother, the bride and the teacher being locations of nurturance, beauty and ideal femininity) what were boys doing?

We would suggest that one of the reasons US boys rarely told the story of *playing teacher* may not be because it simply was not happening in their peer milieu, but rather that it does not serve the discursive purpose it does for the female participant. The participants in our study told the story to add veracity to their vocational claim, feeling that they needed to shore up their only real professional possibility (Galman, 2012) and also engage in imaginative rehearsal for future ideal femininities. Boys, meanwhile, by the very virtue of their location as boys in a patriarchal US culture, had a different landscape for possible futures and subsequently much less focused need for imaginative rehearsal. We suspect that one reason boys did not rehearse becoming teachers was a result of the discourse in play that reinforced that valued males simply did not become teachers (Mallozzi; Galman, 2015). Furthermore, while young girls saw potential female power (and certainly one of few loci of employment) located in the teachers and mothers they saw every day, boys saw futures and power everywhere else.

With regard to rehearsed futures, boys automatically had what Dworkin (1987) refers to as *side bets*. These are skills, talents, aspirations and entitlements that facilitate finding alternative paths. *Side bets* are the escape route, a plan B; without them, teaching may be the only choice individuals perceive themselves to have. Many participants genuinely wanted to teach, but many others quietly panicked. As one participant nearing the end of her program said, *It's not that I don't want to teach – I mean, I love children – but I am not ready to really 'settle down' to this yet. I may want to do more?* It is also important that there is an arc to this narrative that involves a requiem for other plans – these little girls played teacher, grew up, didn't want to be teachers after all, made other plans, but became teachers anyway, because those other plans were alienating, or not strategic to desired femininity. Teaching felt safe and familiar. And in that way, it was a strategic choice.

It is not insignificant to note that these participants also believed that females are biologically better suited or *naturally* able to teach young children than are men, and also spoke of having a *natural* ability to care for and commune with children. As a result, they did not develop nor did they realize any side-bets that might have allowed them to pursue other avenues. The male students in the same sample, even though they were few in number, had multiple side bets and not surprisingly, several *cash'd in* and left teaching – some before they even began. It is possible that the mystical quality of the *calling* the female participants claim led them to careers in teaching as carework is a narrative shored up by the story of playing teacher. However, the point is not to doubt the veracity of these memories, instead, to think about what use these stories of play may be put in establishing a seeming inevitability. Inevitability of both teaching as a profession and the eventual economic dependency low-wage carework would seem to entail.

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## Notes

- 1 All study participants included in these analyses were young girls in the United States in the mid to late 1990s. These constituted the majority of participants at both sites and is in keeping with demographic data from the time suggesting that the vast majority of the new elementary teacher cadre in teacher preparation cohorts were under the age of 25 and white.
- 2 Barbie's potential careers are limited, it seems. However, in more recent years the Barbie Careers line has expanded to include a babysitter, an eye doctor, a veterinarian, a zookeeper, a cake decorator and a rather perplexing dog walker/dog potty trainer.

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