

Chapter 2

Performativity, “D”iscourse, and the Woman/Teacher/ Mother Entanglement

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ABSTRACT

This chapter approaches the question of why the stigma against childfree classroom teachers exists from a combined historical and theoretical perspective. The author considers the idea of the woman schoolteacher as what Weiler (1989) refers to as “an ideological construct” (p. 9). The chapter begins with a look at the feminization of teaching and what it meant for the role of women in the classroom. The chapter goes on to use Barad’s extension of Butler’s notion of performativity to consider what is implied by the reading of the performance of motherhood and how that relates to the expectations of women teachers.

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PERFORMATIVITY, DISCOURSE, AND THE WOMAN/ TEACHER/MOTHER ENTANGLEMENT

There is stigma that exists against childfree women (e.g., Grindle, 2023; Hintz & Haywood, 2021; Lisle, 1999; Rick & Meisenbach, 2017). This stigma can be especially complicated as it relates to schoolteachers (e.g., Cunnane, 2020; McIntosh, 2021; Wyman, 2024). To highlight this, Wyman (2024) points out recently resurfaced comments by Republican Senator JD Vance about a woman who was president of the American Federation of Teachers. He lumped her into a larger group of childfree educators and said, “they’re people without kids, trying to brainwash the minds of our children” (para. 2). This is part of a stigma felt by childfree educators in which their judgment and knowledge of children is questioned (e.g., Cunnane, 2020; McIntosh, 2021; Wyman, 2024). In my time as a classroom teacher, I always wondered why the stigma existed. It was not until I spent time reading gender theory that I started to theorize further about the phenomenon.

To begin, a confession – I write this chapter having had three distinct points of view as it relates to this topic, some of them overlapping. I spent 10 years working as a childfree teacher (both while married and not, for a long time I had no plans to have children). In that time, I was regularly asked if I had kids, or when I might have kids, but I was also asked confrontational questions, such as “What could you possibly know about raising a boy?” More recently, I have been a teacher educator for 6 years. I am also a parent now (somewhere along the way, I changed my mind about having a child), and my child has been an elementary aged student for the last 6 years, having had 3 childless/free teachers. These roles have impacted my own feelings about the stigma that childfree teachers bear in complicated ways. In writing this, I am forced to examine the stigma from both sides. Have I internalized the stigma that I once felt?

This chapter will approach the question of why the stigma against child-free classroom teachers exists from a combined historical and theoretical perspective. I will consider the idea of the woman schoolteacher as what Weiler (1989) refers to as “an ideological construct” (p. 9). I will begin with a look at the feminization of teaching and what it meant for the role of women in the classroom. I will then use Barad’s extension of Butler’s notion of performativity to consider what is implied by the reading of the performance of motherhood and how that relates to the expectations of women teachers.

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