

The Re-domestication of Women Teachers in the 21st Century

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Consider the following scenario: Jane and Anna are young non-permanent teachers at a suburban junior high school in Nova Scotia. One day after school, Anna comes into Jane's classroom while Jane is marking assignments and proceeds to decorate one of Jane's bulletin boards. When Jane protests, Anna ignores her, declaring that she cannot take it any longer—that Jane's bare classroom and lack of décor makes Anna question if Jane cares about the students and how they are able to learn in this type of pared-down environment. Anna's classroom, on the contrary, is decorated in the feminine pink and white style of her own living room, complete with rugs, pillows, knickknacks, fake plants, and photos from her wedding. In the days that follow, the school staff joke about how Jane needed Anna's help in order to make her classroom more appealing to the students. Jane is frustrated by this as she feels confident in what and how she teaches, and wonders when classroom appearance became a symbol of care. She is also concerned that she is being judged as a woman first and a teacher second.

This paper takes up a critical feminist approach through a conceptual analysis of the above fictional case study as a way to explore Jane's question concerning appearance, care, and appearance *of* care. Throughout Nova Scotia's history, women teachers have fought to create and maintain professional status and autonomy; however, the teaching intensification of the last few decades appears to have left some confused about what it means to be a "good" and "caring" woman teacher. Drawing from literature on the good teacher and the ethics of care, I argue that the embracing of traditional feminine stereotypes such as teacher-as-mother and work-as-its-own-reward in response to increased demands placed on the public school system has led to a "re-domestication" of women teachers in the 21st century. It is difficult to say whether this re-domestication phenomenon is a return to the historic notion that schools and women teachers are an extension of the domestic sphere, or an intensification of the domestic ideals that never left; either way, it is worth examining what such gender performativity might mean for our collective understanding of the good woman teacher and of the public school system in general.

The history of women teachers in Nova Scotia can be divided into three stages: feminization, professionalization, and intensification. Women began teaching in Nova Scotia public schools in 1838; prior to this date, women had taught almost exclusively within the private sphere in private schools, as governesses, and at the proverbial kitchen table. The push for a state-supported school system led to the hiring of women teachers because they were considered cheap sources of labour who were inherently suited for the moral training of future law-abiding citizens and who would uphold middle-class notions of domesticity. Thus, the feminization of teaching describes women teachers' shift from the private to public sphere with the view that teachers and schools would remain an extension of the domestic realm (Guildford, 1992).

Throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, the long battle for teachers' professionalization in Nova Scotia saw the raising and lowering of teacher training standards whenever it was convenient, whether due to lowering taxes or labour shortages. This only added to the notion that in a pinch, any woman could perform a job associated with the domestic sphere, and any man could perform a job associated with women (Guildford, 1992). For almost 100 years, between the 1860s and 1950s, Nova Scotia set itself apart from other Canadian provinces and American states for being known as a place "where politicians were more concerned with keeping taxes

low than with providing qualified teachers” (Perry, 2013, p. 186). It was only the 1950 Commission on Teacher Education which sought to attract “wealthier and supposedly more culturally advantaged” (Perry, 2013, p. 198) teachers that urged the province to adopt a mandatory two-year teaching program at the Nova Scotia Teachers College (NSTC); a move that would only come to pass 11 years later in 1961 (Perry, 2013). The NSTC was eventually shut down in 1994 when teacher education was moved entirely to the university level (Nova Scotia Teachers College & PNC Historical Site, 2024).

Around this time, the teaching intensification in Canada in the late 1990s and 2000s ushered in “important propositions concerning compression of and changes in the time demands of teaching ... these changes—which are really forms of work degradation—are often ‘misrecognized’ by teachers themselves as enhanced professionalism” (Hargreaves, 1991, p. 1). Andy Hargreaves (1991) suggested that these changes, such as the notion that schools and even individual teachers are somehow responsible for rectifying greater child welfare issues, as well as the “virtually unattainable standards of pedagogical perfection [teachers] set themselves” (p. 11) within a job in which the endless planning, marking, paperwork, and purchasing of supplies could be performed around the clock should one choose to do so, stem from both external and internal forces. One notable example that Hargreaves (1991) gave—and which resonates with the case study above—is that of the teacher who spent more than \$1000 of her own money on materials for her classroom. He went on to explain that “the ethic of care was a powerful source of motivation and direction for these teachers—not surprisingly ... given its pervasiveness as a central moral principle among women” (Hargreaves, 1991, p. 19). In recent years, studies by Elizabeth Pittard (2017) and Catharyn Shelton et al. (2020) have critiqued similar ideas regarding “good” women teachers and the pressure to consume constantly, along with the implication that when all else fails, good teaching can be bought.

Following the legacy of the feminization of teaching, it is this intensification of the teaching profession that appears to have left some contemporary women teachers with the prevailing historical idea that schools must still act as an extension of the domestic sphere. Returning to the case study, the intensification of teaching’s emphasis on child welfare and pedagogical perfection may have led Anna to believe that she is performing care by transforming her classroom into her version of the good home life. This is similar to what Tracy Barber (2002) described as:

Teachers, reflecting societal expectations and ideals, assume this requires a particular sort of caring; a greater need for support of the child’s general welfare. These students are perceived to particularly need the school as a haven from their families’ social, emotional and economic difficulties. (p. 393)

Here, it is the question of *whose* haven, *whose* home, *whose* version of motherhood, domesticity, and the private sphere that some women teachers seek to emulate within their classrooms. In Anna’s case, the choice itself to decorate her classroom as if it were a home, along with the particularly feminized style of décor that she uses, promotes traditionally middle-class feminine stereotypes. What’s more, as with Hargreaves’ (1991) example of the teacher who spent over \$1000 on classroom materials, the disposable time, money, and energy that Anna spends on decorating her classroom suggests that the “psychic income” (Folbre, 1995) that she receives from this type of labour serves as its own separate reward—a sentiment reminiscent of the historic idea that women and women teachers were naturally inclined to perform domestic duties (Guildford, 1992).

Feminist philosophers and their work on the good teacher and the ethics of care challenge such historical and contemporary notions of the roles and responsibilities of women teachers; particularly such tropes as teacher-as-mother and work-as-its-own-reward. Nel Noddings (1988) insisted that “the mother-child relation [is] rarely appropriate for other relations” (p. 219), while Carol Gilligan (2014) wrote of how the celebration of certain traits—in a female teacher’s case, sacrifice, selflessness, and working out of “love” for the children—as “the epitome of feminine goodness” is morally problematic and, in fact, is the antithesis of care (p. 102). Indeed, Anna’s demonstration of care through the embracing of traditional feminine stereotypes such as sacrificing her own time, money, and energy to provide her students with a classroom representative of an idyllic feminized domestic space, suggests that the issue is not only that teachers perform such acts of domesticity within the public space of the classroom, but also whether their version of care is founded upon the ethics of care, or alternatively, patriarchal hierarchies and gendered divisions of labour. In other words, it is important to examine which teachers—and in turn which students, if any—benefit from Anna’s version of care, and which do not.

Robin Zheng (2018) wrote of how “being able to work out of love, and viewing the demand for compensation as ‘bad taste’ or evidencing insufficient devotion to the craft ... is a luxury available to the leisure rather than the working class” (p. 241). The luxury of choosing to pour one’s earnings as a teacher back into the classroom signifies not only a certain kind of teacher, but also a certain kind of woman; a kind more closely aligned with the stereotype of the middle-class woman and “the compensatory ‘psychic income’ they are assumed to receive from the joy of helping others, rather than, say, gender discrimination” (Zheng, 2018, p. 242). In the case study, it appears as though Anna is celebrated for being a good teacher through the lens of being a good woman. Judith Butler (1988) suggested that this type of gender performance is a strategy of survival, as “gender is a performance with clearly punitive consequences ... those who fail to do their gender right are regularly punished” (p. 522). Indeed, Jane is mocked by both Anna and their colleagues for not providing the right kind of classroom environment. Teachers who accept and accentuate traditional feminine stereotypes under the guise of good and caring teaching, reinforce professional hierarchies and discourage heterogeneous workforces (Braun, 2011). On the contrary, Jane Roland Martin (1991) maintained that good and caring women teachers “are drawn from the entire population rather than a privileged segment of it” (p. 23). Such practices work to challenge the conflation of *care* and *sacrifice*, *money* and *morality*, and *woman* and *domesticity*.

Ultimately, the history of women teachers in Nova Scotia cannot be divorced from present-day questions concerning the roles and responsibilities of their contemporary counterparts. The embracing of traditional feminine stereotypes such as teacher-as-mother and work-as-its-own-reward in response to increased demands placed on the public school system appears to have led to a “re-domestication” of women teachers in the 21st century. In an ironic twist of events, it is possible that this re-domestication phenomenon is not just a symptom of the recent teaching intensification, but is also a survival strategy in response to the demands placed on women teachers in regard to child welfare and pedagogical perfection. When all else fails, perhaps some women teachers believe that if they cannot attain the increasingly unattainable standards of their profession, they can at least be celebrated for being good and caring teachers through the lens of being good and caring women; however, the celebration of such stereotypes risks creating an exclusionary profession that further perpetuates the dominant culture. It brings forth questions concerning the identities, abilities, and personal circumstances of women

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teachers that are both valued and devalued within our public education system. Overall, there is much left to unpack as to how teachers demonstrate care, the historical, political, and ethical implications of whose version of care is considered acceptable, and which teachers this includes and excludes in turn.

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