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‘Role model’ or ‘facilitator’? Exploring male teachers’ and male trainees’ perceptions of the term ‘role model’ in England

Abstract

The call for more males to work with children in their formative years remains prevalent in education discourse across the globe. Assertions that these men will positively address boys’ poor behaviour and underachievement, as well as serving as father figures and role models for boys, continue to fuel international policy making and shape media reporting and public opinion. This paper interrogates findings from original research which set out to explore the perceptions of white male primary school educators in England (both teaching and training) in relation to the term ‘role model’. The results, drawn from a rigorous analysis of in-depth focus group interviews, highlight intriguing similarities and differences in professional thinking and suggest the need for a re-imaging of the term. The research has large-scale implications in terms of suggesting important revisions to ‘more-men’ policy making, for work-based professional training and development, and in informing societal discourse.

Introduction

Even though a 'Y-chromosome makes male[1] teachers instantly visible in a primary school' (Walker, 2015), the Department for Education (DfE) (2018) in England suggests that men only make up 25.1% of those who work with/teach children in their formative years (ages 3-11). In light of this, Ellis (2016) asserts that there is a '[c]risis in primary schools as almost a MILLION children don't have a male teacher' throughout their primary school career [original emphasis]. Claims of this nature are not limited to England; similar concerns are recognised in countries such as Australia (McGarth and Van Bergen, 2017), Canada (Martino and Rezai-Rashti, 2010), Trinidad and Tobago (Joseph and Jackman, 2014), New Zealand (White, 2011) and China (Hernández, 2016). International efforts to increase the number of men in primary schools have been largely fuelled by a number of negative 'drivers' that male teachers are believed to be able to positively counter (Skelton, 2009); these include:

- the gender gap between boys' and girls' academic attainment,
- the 'feminisation' of approaches to teaching in the classroom,
- the absence of father figures in boys' lives, and
- concerns about boys' poor conduct and their attitudes towards learning.

More recently, the DfE (2017, 24) claims that 'increased gender diversity', particularly in the Early Years workforce (0-5), will 'better reflect…wider society [and] enhance children's experiences', a sentiment that is equally applicable to the primary school context.

[1] The authors fully acknowledge that the language used in this paper mirrors reductive, heteronormative and exclusionary understandings of sex/gender that continue to be used in international policy/academic literature /societal discourse. The exclusion of queer, trans, intersex and nonbinary communities (both adults and children), for example, in this discussion is not deliberate but is merely the result of journal article wordage constraints.

This paper locates itself in the heart of this ‘men teacher crisis’ by focussing its attention on the role model argument, a prominent idea which presents male primary school teachers as helping boys to ‘improve school performances and strengthen their gender identity’ (Faulstich-Wieland, 2013, 65) by acting as male role models. In recent years there has been much questioning in education policy and research about the notion of ‘role modelling’ as being an adequate or well-supported way of understanding how children learn and develop (see Skelton, 2012; Tarrant *et al*., 2015; Watson, 2017; Moosa and Bhana, 2019), especially in relation to male teachers and boys’ achievement. Despite this, the ‘role model’ continues to be a ‘common sense’ assertion in public, professional and political discourse (McGrath and Sinclair, 2013) even though a level of ambiguity surrounds what is meant by the term (see **X**). Original research reported in this paper adds to this discussion by interrogating the meaning of ‘role model’ as proposed by white male primary school teachers and those training to become primary teachers in England. Prior to a presentation and examination of the research data, we critically review some the existing literature by exploring the complexities of the ‘role model’ by discussing proposed definitions of the term in relation to new thinking.

A critical review of definitions of ‘role model’

Mutter and Pawlowski (2014, 325) assert that ‘[t]he role model concept is founded on different theories, namely social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986; Bandura and Walters, 1963), role theory (Biddle, 1979), theory of role identification (Foote, 1951; Kagan, 1958) and the theory of social comparison (Festinger, 1954)’. The term ‘role model’ is credited to Merton (1957) who introduced it through his understanding of social groups. Holton (2004, 514) explains how Merton ‘emphasi[s]ed that, rather than assuming one status and one role, a person has a status set in the social structure to which is attached a whole role-set of expected behavio[u]r.’ This vague description has led to the likes of Irvine (1989, 52) lamenting that ‘the concept of role model is an ill-defined and imprecise

term that begs for more clarity and debate.'[2] Despite a suite of definitions being proposed by academics in various fields, research by Biskup and Pfister (1999, 204) concluded that the notion of role model was 'multifaceted, ambivalent and often difficult to understand and interpret.' This has contributed to the continued 'ambiguity, incompatibility and conflict' (Holton, 2004, 515) which is attributed to the term up to the present day, particularly in the education arena. Given that the term is freely used in public, professional and political discourse, it is of concern that this ambiguity persists, particularly when discussing male teacher absence in primary schools, as this discourse continues to influence and shape current government policy making in England (see DfE, 2017, 24). This ambiguity is fuelled, in part, by proposed definitions of the term 'role model' which are susceptible to critique. As such, the discussion below is offered to exemplify some of the complexities associated with these different definitions; it is not to identify a persuasive definition of 'role model' (as if, in some positivistic sense, such a 'true' definition exists).

Definitions used by researchers and academics typically consider the term 'in the widest sense' (MacCallum and Beltman, 2002, 1) by collectively subscribing to the idea of the role model as a *human being*:

- A 'person you respect, follow, look up to or want to be like' (Bricheno and Thornton, 2007, 385)
- A 'person whose behaviour in a particular social setting is imitated by others, especially younger persons' (Osabu-Kle, 2005, 1)

These definitions go some way to support Lockwood and Kunda's (1997) claim that a role model is an 'inspirational and/or motivational individual, someone from whom one can learn and model

[2] Indeed, the notion of 'role modelling' is heavily criticised given that Bandura's Social Learning Theory holds that individuals learn through observation and imitation of their adult role model, e.g. aggression is learned from aggressive role models (Bandura & Huston, 1961), ignoring the influence of the media (watching television) and biological factors such as the role of hormones and genetics on behaviour and development.

desired behaviours' (cited in Sealy and Singh, 2010, 285). Efforts to establish who might be regarded as a role model 'have traditionally been defined as adults to whom youth look up to and desire to be like' (Hurd *et al.*, 2016, 1), with parents being seen as prominent examples for children and young people. However, in recent years, international education policy making has advocated the idea that '[m]ale teachers can serve as role models and contribute to students developing positive gender identities' (OECD, 2015, 5). Contemporary research, however, has challenged this thinking, identifying peers (Ruggeri *et al*., 2018) and near peers (Muir, 2018) as more powerful examples of role models that children and young people look up to. Bricheno and Thornton (2007, 383) build on this, arguing that children's agentic role sees them looking to 'close relatives for their role models' such as their siblings (Walker, 2007) and not their teachers. Interestingly, the notion of the role model as being 'a symbolic entity' (Lockwood and Kunda, 1997) helps to acknowledge the influence of *non-human* role models for children that are offered through multimedia sources (see Scheibe, 2007, 64); these include video game leads, animated characters and fantasy creatures. These can be extended by recognising additional multimedia elements that children see as 'relatable role models' (Knight, 2018), these being text-, image- or audio-based.

Many definitions of the role model present it as being someone that is known to or by the modeller[3], with Ingall (1997) suggesting that this is principally achieved through personal contact and relationships. For children this contact is largely facilitated through a physical presence with someone or something rather than this being based solely on a virtual presence (think young social media stars for young people). Walker (2007, 516) builds on this assertion, defining role models as being 'geographically, generationally and experientially close to their [modellers'] lives'. This opposes Allen's (1990, 36) description of the role model being 'a symbol of special achievement', particularly as Hutchings *et al.* (2008, 138) warn that '[i]n this sense the term role model becomes

[3] Defined for the purposes of this paper as the person who is modelling (imitating) the role model.

conflated with star, idol or hero'. This notion is strongly refuted by Walker (2007, 509), especially when the term is attributed to 'celebrity':

> The more famous a celebrity becomes, and the more that is known about [their] glamorous private life, the less similarity [their] life bears to that of an ordinary [person] and the less point there is in trying to emulate [them].

As such, it is argued that children should be made aware of more *physically close* role models in their local environment, e.g. friends, neighbours, family and community members, as opposed to choosing *physically distant* role models to shape their behaviour, attitudes, culture, moral values, fashion and lifestyle choices (see Jain *et al.*, 2015).

Suggestions that there should be some kind of 'match' between the role model and the modeller are prominent in role model discourse and policy making. Whilst this 'match' could cross intersectional dimensions such as social class, religion, occupation or able-bodiedness, typically this is based on gender (see Lockwood, 2006), e.g. a male role model for boys/young men and a female role model for girls/young women. However, X challenges this, arguing that male and female role models can be for all children, especially when the qualities and characteristics that role models typically emulate – *being reliable, trustworthy, kind* and *respectful* – are androgynous in nature. Despite this, role model discourse and policy making continue to subscribe to the 'gender-match', with Zirkel (2002, 363) building on this assertion by suggesting that the role model is 'of the same race' and ethnicity as the modeller. More recently, Gomillion and Giuliano (2011, 330) extend this by 'matching' role models based on the intersectional dimension of sexual orientation: 'media role models [who identify as LGBTQ+] serv[ing] as sources of pride, inspiration, and comfort.' Whilst pleasingly progressive, these developments in role model thinking unfortunately remain overshadowed by the dominant advocation of a role model as being someone to emulate. Yancey (1998, 254) supports this, arguing

that a role model is ‘perceived as [being] exemplary, or worthy of imitation.’ However, this raises the question as to *what* is actually being imitated. Shapiro *et al.*’s (1978, 52) definition attempts to address this by suggesting that ‘individuals whose behaviours, personal styles and specific attributes are emulated by others’ become role models. Confusion, however, remains with regard to the *nature* of the specific behaviours, styles and attributes that might be worthy of emulation. Given Allen’s (1993, 267) definition of a role model as ‘an ethical template for the exercise of adult responsibilities’, one would assume that these behaviours, styles and attributes are ‘good’ or ‘positive’ in nature. Support for this is noted in the thinking of Solomon (1997, 399) who defines role models as those ‘whose achievement, lifestyles, philosophies, and/or values ha[ve] a positive impact on [others’] self-esteem and aspirations in life.’ Gibson (2004, 136), however, suggests that the situation may be more nuanced, arguing that ‘individuals [can] actively observe, adapt and reject attributes of…role models’; this suggests that role models can be negative or ‘bad’ by emulating undesirable qualities, traits or behaviours (**X**). An increasing number of definitions endorse this thinking, with Al Khalidi *et al*. (2015) going so far as to argue that *negative* role models can have a *positive* impact on modellers! However, the vast majority of descriptions of role models continue to present the role model in favourable terms and as an individual; this is exemplified by Gauntlett (2008, 1): ‘‘someone to look up to,’ and someone to base your character, values or aspirations upon’. Contemporary thinking, however, challenge the perceptions that the role model is as positive or as clear as many definitions of the term present it as being, arguing that role models are not necessarily just one person. To validate these assertions, our research set out to critically explore perceptions of the role model from those who are considered in the literature to *be* role models to children in their formative years.

The research

The original research reported in this paper is taken from a funded study in England which sought to examine both identity and role expectations of male educators in primary schools. A central focus was on critically exploring the perceptions of men who train or who actively work in primary school classrooms (5-11) in relation to the meaning, definitions of and tensions associated with the male role model. By embracing a clear focus on probing their thoughts and opinions, the research adopted a strong subscription to the interpretive paradigm (Denzin and Lincoln, 2018). This was reflective of our shared epistemological positioning as we believed that listening to the views and thinking of both male primary school trainees and teachers would help us to gain valuable insight about how the role model was interpreted. We specifically set out to capture these different views as we knew of no other study which had sought to explore these different 'voices' in the same research project. Indeed, due to a noted dearth in recent research which captured the voices and perceptions of men in education, our research was purposefully undertaken in an effort to 'provide a much-needed evidence base for understanding' (Warin, 2018) whilst adding to the existing range of exclusive perspectives offered by Cushman (2008 – principals/head teachers), Jones (2006 – female teachers) and McGrath and Sinclair (2013 – parents and sixth-grade students).

To capture these 'voices' a qualitative research design was utilised. Focus group interviews (FGIs) were selected as the most appropriate data collection method given that this kind of interview has the potential to reveal rich narrative representations of social experience and elucidate the meanings they have for the speaker (Patton 2015). Indeed, the utilisation of FGIs enabled the creation of data from multiple voices, while also allowing us to capture participants' views by uncovering those aspects of understanding that often remain hidden in the more conventional in-depth individual interviewing method (Krueger and Casey, 2014). A semi-structured interview schedule was developed to ensure that the data collected was systematic and comprehensive while the interviews themselves remained conversational and situational, broadly guided by the schedule

(Thomas, 2017). This enabled the lead author (as facilitator) to slightly adapt the questions that were asked (see Table 1) and the order in which they were presented to participants as and when necessary, maintaining a relaxed atmosphere that allowed participants to better engage and express themselves more openly via a free-flowing discussion. Evidence of this came in the form of verbal comments made by two participants at the end of one of the FGIs.

[INSERT TABLE 1 HERE]

Recruitment of potential participants involved the use of convenience sampling with email invitations being sent out and eliciting voluntary involvement from eleven males, five of whom were engaged in their postgraduate primary teacher training course and six men who were actively working in the local primary school sector in the South East of England. These men were selected as they offered a unique research opportunity to compare the views of different education professionals – those who were engaged in initial teacher training (primary) and those who were in the first few years of their career in primary education. As such, participants were divided into two groups, one consisting of the six male primary school teachers (each one having between 1 and 4 years of full-time teaching experience), the other group consisting of the five male teacher trainees who were all studying at the same higher education institution in England and were half way through their one-year training programme. In terms of ethnicity all participants were White British – we were unable to recruit any participants from culturally diverse backgrounds to take part in the research. Details regarding the age, social class, sexual orientation and gender identity of participants were not collected as this information was deemed too personal for the purposes of this research.

To assure ethical and research integrity, we abided by the guidelines set out by the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2011; 2018). To facilitate trust and interest, participants

were carefully informed about the research, their rights and what their potential participation would entail through both verbal and written means. Consent letters were collected either via email or directly from participants prior to each of the FGIs. The right to withdraw at any stage of the research process was emphasised before each FGI took place. Assurances were also given to participants regarding issues of confidentiality and anonymity, how access to the data would be limited to the research team, and the ways in which the data would be stored safely. Verbal permission was sought to digitally record the FGIs (both audio and video) and no objections were raised.

Following completion of the two FGIs (each being one hour in duration), the digital recordings were then carefully transcribed verbatim in preparation for data analysis. This was achieved by methodically coding the data using NVIVO, which provided a valuable tool for analysing the interviews thematically (Bazeley and Jackson, 2013). Thematic analysis was chosen as the method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns within the data for its compatibility with the interpretive paradigm (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The themes within the data were identified in a rigorously inductive way as the themes were strongly linked to the data themselves. Responses were analysed using the procedure described by Hayes (2000):

- Firstly, the interview transcripts were carefully read and re-read without paying attention to what other research had identified in order to identify meaningful units of text relevant to the research topic – this was achieved by employing a research assistant who had limited knowledge of existing research in the field.
- Secondly, units of text dealing with the same issue were grouped together in analytic categories, an example of which includes ‘a parent’, ‘a carer’ and ‘a famous person’ which were grouped together in the category *sources of role models* for children. It is important to note that the same unit of text was included in more than one category.

- Thirdly, the data were systematically reviewed to ensure that a name (node) and exhaustive set of data to support each category were identified, an example of which includes *tensions*.

A careful interrogation of the various themes that emerged from our data is offered below; these include *being a role model, behaviours, sources of role model* and *tensions*. For ease of presentation, the results have been organised under two broad headings: *similarities* in professional thinking and *differences* between the thinking of white male primary school teachers and trainees in relation to the term 'role model'.

Results

Similarities

Comparing the views of the white male primary school teachers and trainees in our research highlighted a number of similar perceptions. In terms of *being a role model*, both groups predominately saw the role model as an aspirational figure, someone "to look up to" ('James', trainee) as a result of them being "respected in some capacity" ('Rob', teacher). Efforts to establish how a role model was able to earn this respect were heavily attributed to the kinds of *behaviours* that they modelled: 'Andy' (teacher) saw the role model as being "an appropriate example of how to act", with 'Will' (trainee) describing these behaviours as being "good" or "best" ways to conduct oneself. Specificity of the positive behaviours attributed to the role model saw the male teachers focusing on the ways that the role model approached particular situations, for example "conversations … friendships [and] how to treat people" ('Harry', teacher); indeed, 'Rob' (teacher) spoke passionately about the "wider values" of the role model – "not just specifically what your job role is" – and "doing the right thing". In comparison, the thoughts of male trainees were focused more on the kinds of positive "attitudes" that the role model exhibited ('Matt', trainee), a sentiment that was also mentioned by 'Michael' (teacher).

Descriptions from the two groups both signalled that *being a role model* meant being imitated by others. The male trainees, for example, chose to use verbs such as 'copy' and 'replicate' in their verbal explanations, whereas 'Rob' (teacher) used the analogy of a duckling following a duck to exemplify the "mimicking" of the behaviours of the role model by those that were emulating them. Both the male teachers and trainees also perceived the role model as being an "influence" on the opinions and choices that others made ('Mark', trainee). Of interest, however, is that the *sources of role model* were not just regarded as being an individual entity (person), e.g. another child in class, a parent/carer or a famous person (as suggested by the trainees), but also as a collective, "a group that demonstrates aspirational behaviour" ('Michael', teacher). When invited to explain his new way of perceiving the role model, the example of a Year Six (ages 10-11) football team was used to support 'Michael's' assertion of a role model being represented by more than one person:

> [I'm] thinking about the way they [the footballers] became a team, and how the team performed with the team as a role model rather than just as individuals.

Differences

Not only did the FGIs yield similarities in thinking between the white male teachers and trainees but a number of interesting differences emerged. Whilst many of the male teachers saw the *behaviours* of the role model as being "mimicked" or copied by others ('Rob', teacher), the male trainees argued that being a role model did not necessarily equate to all behaviours of the role model being imitated; instead, *being a role model* was seen as someone who commanded attention, this being either positive or negative in nature. To contextualise this, reference was made to David Beckham [white English international footballer] who, at the height of his popularity, used to spit on the football pitch, a "bad behaviour" that 'Will' (trainee) reported as being subsequently copied by the children he worked with. Interestingly, the idea of sports personalities serving as *sources of role*

model was far more prominent in the FGI with the male trainees than with the male teachers; reference was also given to Cristiano Ronaldo (European Portuguese footballer), Jason Robinson (mixed-race English rugby player) and Joe Root (white English international cricketer). Despite this, the male trainees raised the point that the role model was not just attributable to sportspeople and school teachers but to "anyone and everyone" ('Matt', trainee); examples included older siblings and friends ('James', trainee), "far-off celebrities"/"idols" that included rock stars ('Mark', trainee) and, interestingly, mothers ('Alistair', trainee). Discussions during the male teachers' FGI raised *tensions* in that there was a perceived gender-match between the role model and the modeller, e.g. a male role model for a male pupil. In contrast, the male trainees questioned this "obvious choice" ('Mark', trainee), arguing that "there's nothing necessarily to stop your role model being a woman", a sentiment supported and extended by 'Matt' (trainee):

> Yeah, there are patterns and behaviours, which is what they're [children] picking up, mostly. It can be gender neutral. So, someone can be kind, whether they're male or female. Even as a child, you can recognise that.

Despite the fact that male teachers were perceived and described as positive role models for children ('Rob', teacher), *tensions* emerged when members of the male teacher FGI began questioning this idea as the interview progressed, with 'Harry' (teacher) arguing that "we're the teacher, we don't actually want them [children] to behave like us, because we're the teacher, we do things different". In partial contrast, the male trainees recognised how male teachers were perceived as role models as they could "change you for the better" but challenged the idea of children automatically liking them or "wanting their life" ('Will', trainee).

When reviewing the transcripts, we noted that only two attempts were made by participants to define the term 'role model'. 'Will' (trainee) suggested that "the clue is in the name – 'model' – a

person who acts as a model for you"; this is in contrast to 'Harry's' (teacher) definition which saw it as a "model of roles", suggesting a re-imaging of the term to reflect the "many people you meet in your life [that] can all have different influences on you".

Discussion

Interrogation of the data yielded a number of interesting findings when comparing the similarities and differences in thinking between the white male primary school teachers and trainees. Efforts to explore what it was perceived to be like *being a role model* typically saw participants collectively recognising the role model as being 'someone' or 'somebody', suggesting not only that the role model was a person but was also a single entity. This validates many definitions of the 'role model' proposed in existing literature, both in sources of information for the general public such as dictionaries (Cambridge Dictionary, 2019) and those developed by academics in research (see Gauntlett, 2002, 211). Our research, however, builds on this, suggesting that the role model refers not only to an individual but also a group of people, a sports team (for example) as a *source of role model* that serves as a 'collective role model unit' [our words] due to its shared approach to teamwork and sportsmanship. Assertions that role models "just have to be a single person" ('Matt', trainee) were challenged by others within the male trainee FGI, with 'Will' (trainee), for example, arguing that he did not think that "there's anything necessarily singular about the context of role models". From this, it is reasonable to suggest that pairings, small clusters and large groups of people could *and do* serve as a role model for others, be they at a local, national or international level. It is of interest, however, that this shift in 'quantity thinking' [our words] in relation to *being a role model* fails to appreciate the idea of the role model being 'some*thing*' (Harris *et al*., 2016, 2; added emphasis) rather than some*one*, suggesting that the role model could be in the form of an inanimate object. Indeed, research by McDonald and Kim (2001) found that *sources of role models* for children could include fictional computer game characters. Whilst the notion of the role model

“suggests something active” (**X**), our findings strongly validate English policy making which unanimously views role models as living human beings as opposed to being individuals in games, literature and television programmes that may be considered ‘living’ in the eyes and minds of those who look to them as a role model (children).

When reflecting on the different *sources of role model* identified in our research, the male trainees were more vocal in recognising several interesting influences. The male trainees were adamant that role models could be “anyone and everyone” (‘Will’, trainee), suggesting that they were not solely from a particular profession or sector, e.g. education or sports. In support of this, ‘Matt’ (trainee) suggested that “that there are so many people you meet in your life and they can all have different influences on you”. Efforts to gain clarity on who might serve as a role model for children yielded a plethora of individuals who have been organised into two main categories that were proposed by ‘Alistair’ (trainee) – “Real-world” role models and “Far-off celebrities”:

[INSERT TABLE 2 HERE]

These categories acknowledge how geographical proximity influences those who are perceived as role models for others, with both male teachers and trainees placing a heavy emphasis on those found in the locality rather than on individuals who might be considered “glossily distant” (Walker, 2007, 515) in terms of their location, experience and/or age. Indeed, this finding supports research by Bricheno and Thornton (2007) who concluded that children favour role models from their direct social environment, e.g. their friends and/or relatives. It is clear though that geographical proximity is not the sole influence on identified sources of role model (“those in India are likely to have Indian role models” (‘Mark’, trainee)) as we argue that context also needs to be taken into consideration, e.g. the home and the school, due to the amount of direct contact that children are likely to have with these environments. This serves as an important *tension*, especially when the gender of the role

model is taken into consideration within these different contexts. Male trainees in our research "exclusively" ('Mark', trainee) identified male sources of role model from a range of ethnic backgrounds when discussing the concept in relation to boys, the implication being that there was a gender-match between the role model and the child but not necessarily a match in relation to ethnicity. This resonates, in part, with dominant role model discourse and policy making in England which promotes the idea of role models for boys as being male (DfE, 2017). However, when male trainees were asked if women could be role models, there was an emerging acknowledgment that females could indeed be role models; 'Will' (trainee), for example, argued that it was not dependent on the gender of the individual but more to do with the "good patterns and behaviours" that the individual emulated. Gendered assumptions that "boys will look up to a man" ('Alistair', trainee) were thus challenged by the current recognition of role models not being deemed gender specific: "So, someone can be kind, whether they're male or female" ('Alistair', trainee). This is significant, particularly in light of recent public and professional discourse about gender diversity, as policy making in England (DfE, 2017) and practices in primary schools continue to perpetuate the idea that boys will only revere male role models, a viewpoint which we see as being problematic given that it undermines the place, value and benefits of females as role models for both boys and girls, particularly in education contexts (see Cheryan *et al.*, 2011).

One intriguing finding focuses on the notion of teachers serving as role models for children. Whilst teachers were identified as a "Real-world" *source of role model* (see Table 2, page X), our participants began to question the idea of educators being role models despite the assertion that role models were "people who they [children] spend the most time with" ('Alistair', trainee). It is fair to assume, based on this definition, that teachers might be considered role models because of the amount of time they spend with children during the working week. Indeed, national/international policy making and public and professional discourse around male teachers in primary education

overwhelming subscribes to the 'common-sense assumption' (Tarrant *et al*., 2015, 74) of them being role models for children. However, 'Andy' (teacher) argued that "we're the teacher – we don't actually want [children] to behave like us because we're the teacher, we do things different". Instead, it was claimed that the teacher's role was more about "pointing out who are the good role models … getting the children to behave in the way that we might hope by pointing out who is doing it". In support of this, 'Will' (trainee) proposed the idea of the teacher being more of a *facilitator* of growth in children, "structuring something that would allow children to be good people themselves". This idea was illustrated with links being made to music – the teacher might not be very good at playing a particular instrument, but their role as a facilitator would be to ensure that children are able to develop their own musical skills through encouragement, opportunities to practice and perform. This raises an important issue as there is a wide-spread consensus that role models are or have to be 'good'; Lockwood *et al.* (2002, 854), for example, suggest that role models are 'individuals who have achieved outstanding success' through their 'accomplishments'. However, our research suggests that role models might be 'more than one' [our words], e.g. a band or an orchestra, and may actually be perceived as being bad, or at least ineffective (linkage to the theme of *behaviours*). This challenges dominant ideas of what a role model is by arguing that role models might not necessarily be individuals, nor are they the most competent at what they do [playing a music instrument, for example] but that they can facilitate opportunities for others to develop their own competencies through the positive qualities and characteristics that they generously emulate.

Conclusions

Our research presents a level of consensus and ambiguity that surrounds the professional thinking of white male educators who work and train with children in England in relation to the term 'role model'. Given that the multifaceted nature of ideas about the male role model (0-8) was recognised in the work of **X**, it is somewhat disheartening to acknowledge that a decade has passed with little

national/international policy making or research in the field helping professionals to make better sense of the concept of 'role model' in their own context. However, as opposed to striving for a strict definition, we argue that greater clarity is needed to help all primary school educators in all locations (not just England) be more aware of the complexities that surround the role model argument, encouraging them to be guarded about seeing the role model as a 'quick fix' to address those issues identified by Skelton (2009 – see page X) given the limited research evidence that is available to merit its advocation (Billing, 2016). This is of particular importance for headteachers/principals, governing bodies and senior management teams who are constantly being pressured to action a 'generational change' (Gibbons, 2019) by actively recruiting male teachers into the primary school profession, particularly in England, in an effort to address low representation of men in the workforce and serve as 'positive male role models' for boys.

In light of the vital role that professional development plays in the life of effective teachers, we believe that quality training, both initial and continuing, is crucial for educators to facilitate opportunities for them to engage with relevant research such as that which is presented in this paper, critically discussing this to help inform their thinking and deepen their understanding. We summarise the key messages from our research in bullet point form for both reader reflection and review:

- Educators should be encouraged to critically question current policy making and public/ professional discourse in their respective contexts which advocates them as being role models for children, especially male teachers for boys. Our research suggests that what teachers model is not necessarily what children want to or should copy. Instead, teachers should see their role as a *facilitator*, helping to identify potential role models for children to choose from given that they [children] are active agents of learning (Gipps *et al*., 1999) – examples include those who are close to them [children] in different ways, e.g. 'age …

gender, interests, past or present experiences, and also in proximity and in frequency of social contact' (Murphey and Arao, 2001, 1). Indeed, recognising the value of difference signals the need for a more intersectional approach towards the role model argument. While this has not been taken up here for reasons discussed above, this serves as a clear direction for future research concerned with challenging essentialist 'men-for-boys' discourses. Future research also demands a rich exploration of the perceptions of male teachers and trainees from culturally diverse backgrounds as we fully acknowledge that the perceptions of our participants are white-centric which limits the outcomes and implications of this research as it is not representative of all male teachers and trainees.

- Educators need to identify potential role models for children to choose from who serve as a 'collective role model unit' [our words], be they pairs, small clusters, teams or organisations. An appreciation of these units cannot be underestimated as this has the potential to alleviate some of the *tensions* associated with the pressure and stress that individuals such as women in STEM feel under (Drury *et al.*, 2011) when serving as a 'single entity' role model to others [our words].
- Educators need to appreciate that *sources of role models* for children are much more varied than national/international policy making and public/professional discourse currently recognises or advocates, appreciating the influential role that multimedia elements, peers, 'near-peers' and siblings can and do have on children's lives.

The power of modelling is recognised by Acher *et al.* (2007, 398) who describe it as an effective way to facilitate the 'teaching learning process'. We believe that this power needs to be questioned and debated with greater clarity and understanding at a local, national and international level, especially by men who work and train in the primary school workforce; this could be achieved through their active engagement in training opportunities that are informed by rigorous research.

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