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## Male pre-service teachers: navigating masculinities on campus and on placement

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### ABSTRACT

This paper reports on research examining how male pre-service primary school teachers negotiate masculinities during their time within majority-female spaces. Four white undergraduate pre-service teachers in the North of England, UK, who were training to teach children aged 5–11 years were recruited. Interviews took place pre-and-post their seven-week practicum within primary schools, relating to their experiences of masculinity within their course and practicum. Participants kept a solicited diary for the duration of the practicum. Using thematic analysis, we highlight how participants were both subject to and complicit in the (re)production of gendered stereotypes. Findings evidenced the participants' awareness of gendered assumptions placed upon them; however, this did not necessarily predicate their rejection of such positions, suggesting male and female teachers share responsibility for largely maintaining current hegemonic constructions of masculinities within schools.

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Masculinities; primacy schools; thematic analysis; pre-service teachers

## Introduction

Hegemonic masculinity (Connell 1995) often embodies rationality, toughness, success, power, and anti-femininity, impacting men's relationships with each other and with women. More recently, there is research evidence to suggest that some men are actively redefining and reframing traditional masculinities, striving to develop masculinities that may be viewed as positive and representative of the differing variations of masculinities that exist within societies and cultures (e.g. Anderson 2009).

As gender is becoming increasingly recognised as diverse (Bragg et al. 2018), one way of observing this is through societal shifts within workplaces; here the focus is on primary school settings.

Existing research has found that masculinity and being male in numerically female-dominated workspaces (such as primary schools) can cultivate a 'glass escalator' experience (Williams 1992). Conversely, research also points to less beneficial experiences of male teachers. For example, physical and emotional contact with children can be

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viewed as a risky business for male teachers (Carrington 2002; Skelton 2003); men risk their masculinity being under scrutiny (Jones 2007); they can experience ridicule and lack of prestige (Cushman 2005), questions about their sexuality (Skelton 2012), intimations of abnormality (Mills, Martino, and Lingard 2004) and face a construction of themselves as paedophiles or gay (Mills 2004; Skelton 2012; Moosa and Bhana 2020).

### ***Recruitment of male teachers***

There has been an on-going initiative orchestrated by the UK Government to recruit more men into the numerically female-dominated profession of teaching (Brownhill et al. 2020; Carrington et al. 2007; Skelton 2007; Thornton and Bricheno 2006). This initiative is generally led by essentialist beliefs, i.e. male primary school teachers have been called upon for their abilities to become 'positive role models' to male students (Jupp 2013), and improve boys academic engagement. As Skelton (2007) highlights, feminist research demonstrates that not all girls are achieving and not all boys are underachieving; gaps in achievement that have been looked at in relation to gender have failed to take into account the interplay of other factors, such as social class, socio-economic status and ethnicity (see Francis and Skelton 2005; Younger, Warrington, and McLellan 2005). Thus, this call for more male role models within education is a 'straightforward' solution to what, in reality, is a complex problem functioning on different intersecting levels.

Nordänger has suggested that showing interest in pupils and caring for them is at the very core of teaching (2002). This may present a problem for male teachers, however, as care is constructed in antithesis to recognised constructs of Western hegemonic masculinity, leading male teachers to have to defend their reasoning for wanting to work in such an environment, especially when amongst younger children (SOU 2006).

However, there is also research denoting advantages for men within this feminised domain. Warwick, Warwick, and Hopper (2012) found that despite being the minority sex on a teaching training course, men had not felt at a disadvantage. Lahelma (2000) found female teachers to be supportive of their male colleagues and Simpson (2004) has suggested they may benefit from being the minority and be given leadership roles, positive differential treatment and are assumed to have a stronger preference for the career. Teaching hierarchies remain gendered in many primary schools (Moreau, Osgood, and Halsall 2007). For example, in the UK there is a one-in-four chance men will gain a leadership position compared to a one-in-thirteen chance for women, despite the vast numerical domination of women in education (Jones 2008). However, the 'glass escalator' is theorised to work through 'invisible pressures' and, as such, it can be questioned as to what degree of choice men exhibit when moving into leadership roles in education.

### ***Men in primary years teaching***

The choice to focus on male pre-service primary teachers was made as 'pre-service teachers' experiences, especially, might illuminate challenges to the recruitment and retention of males' (Weaver-Hightower 2011, 97). This research explores their constructions of masculinities within their university course together with their experiences on practicum. Research suggests that men are more likely than women to cease teaching

training courses prior to completion (Moyles and Cavendish 2001; Skelton 2009) and thus their experiences may offer us an understanding as to the challenge's men face that may prompt this. It is also important to further understand how masculinities are evoked by the teachers and how they impact on their interactions within school, both with colleagues and pupils, but also how it impacts on their practice and professional identities.

The majority of research looking at male teachers has been conducted outside of the UK (e.g. Cruickshank et al. 2020; Mulholland and Hansen 2003; Stroud et al. 2000). Thus, it is fruitful to contribute to the literature conducted within the UK education system to further discern how masculinities are experienced and negotiated within this context.

## Methodology

This research was approached from a critical realist perspective; although we cannot ever see a reality that is not socially influenced, meaning what is 'real' may not be knowable, this is not to dismiss that there is an authentic reality for individuals. It is therefore important that we treat knowledge and experience as making a difference in society and for individuals (Rogers and Rogers 1997; Braun and Clarke 2013).

Qualitative samples are often purposive in that participants are selected due to their ability to provide 'richly-textured information, relevant to the phenomenon' (Vasileiou et al. 2018, 2). Accordingly, the method of sampling used for this study was purposive homogeneous sampling (Patton 2002); this involves choosing a 'small, homogeneous sample' (235), in which our participants' homogeneity was their gender and university course, in order to understand the experiences of this group in-depth.

The decision to include pre-service teachers enabled us to explore their initial experiences and 'first impressions' of primary schools as a numerically female-dominated workspace, in addition to studying within a numerically female-dominated university course, providing further insight and a more complete picture of participants' experiences of masculinity in such an environment. Recruiting participants from this course meant all participants had had experiences of practicums within schools and were expecting to continue to go on practicums over the remainder of their course.

All participants were from the same institution in the North of England and were in their second year of a three-year course that would provide them with the qualifications to teach primary education upon achievement of their degree. We chose to look at the experiences of second-year students due to their previous experiences of practicums over the first year of their undergraduate degree. We presented the participation opportunity at the beginning of one of the course lectures; the male students were verbally informed of the study before being given a participant information sheet and the opportunity to ask questions. Those who were interested were asked to make contact with the team. The project was presented to the potential participants as an opportunity for them to explore how they have experienced masculinity on a numerically female-dominated course.

As this research topic also concerns educational research, it was necessary that the British Educational Research Association (BERA) ethical guidelines were addressed (BERA 2018) with a focus on the responsibility to my participants. Ethical approval was gained from the relevant university before data collection began.

Despite concerted efforts, there were only four respondents, all identifying as straight, White British men. There are limitations to the small sample size; although qualitative research is not intended to be generalisable in the traditional sense, the small sample size here limits the ability of the data to be representative of (straight, White) male pre-service teachers experiences. However, the data presented can certainly give us important insights that may be further explored in future study and prove useful to consider in similar contexts (Yardley 2017). In addition, the multiple data collection points adds to the richness and greater triangulation of the data, enhancing validity (Yardley 2017). The data used within this analysis were collected from two semi-structured interviews and one solicited placement diary for each participant.

Interviews were chosen due to their ability to collect data for ‘experience-type’ research questions (Braun and Clarke 2013); participants were able to express in their own language their perspectives and experiences when responding to the interview questions posed (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). Braun and Clarke outline 6–10 interviews for a qualitative study (2013, 48) – this study has collected 8 (pre-and-post participant practicums).

Diary entries were solicited weekly during the participant’s 7-week practicums. The nature of solicited diaries is that participants write them at the request of the researcher (Meth, 2017); thus, knowledge produced is purposeful and extrinsically linked to the aims of the research; ‘they are necessarily selective and partial’ (Meth, 2017, 96). Diaries, even structured, offer participants the opportunity to collect their thoughts, stop and start extracts and enable a comprehensive and thought-through entry that on-the-spot data collection (e.g. interviews) may inhibit. See Table 1 for time points of data collection, in addition to participant demographics.

At the time of data collection, the principal researcher (first author) was a postgraduate student at the university in which the participants were recruited. The first and second authors had no prior connection with the participants, while the third author was a tutor on the course at the time of data collection who facilitated the initial presentation of the research participation opportunity prior to a course lecture. This was the limit of the third author’s practical involvement, although they were able to advise about the timings of placements the participants would be undertaking in order to plan data collection around this. Those wishing to participate made contact with the principal researcher only and all data were collected by the principal researcher.

On average the first interviews lasted 36 min; participants were asked questions concerning their motivations to teach, responses they had received from friends and family, experiences of their undergraduate course and past practicums, expectations of their future practicums and career, and whether they have felt at a (dis)advantage due to their gender during their undergraduate degree or practicums.

**Table 1.** Participant information including demographics and participation dates.

Participant Pseudonym	Age at first point of data collection	Dates of first interview	Weeks covered by diary entries	Dates of second interview
Peter (Pan)	20	9th January 2019	W/C 28th January	28th March
Dan (Morcombe)	21	10th January 2019	W/C 4th February	28th March
Steven	21	10th January 2019	W/C 11th February	28th March
Fred	20	8th January 2019	W/C 25th February W/C 4th March W/C; 11th March W/C 18th March	26th April

Participants were asked after their first interview to complete a solicited diary on a weekly basis upon their commencement of practicum. They were asked to reflect on highlights or lowlights of their week's practicum, their relationship with their mentor, colleagues and children in their class, any biases they think mentors or colleagues may have held about themselves or other staff members and any situations where their gender was made relevant.

Within three weeks after the first interview, all participants began a 7-week practicum in schools and year groups were assigned to them through the university. Contact was made with participants via email during the school holidays over which their practicum fell, approximately halfway through the 7-weeks. This contact point served as a general check-in, giving participants the opportunity to voice any queries or concerns, also helping establish whether the participants were still actively participating in the research, helping to prevent attrition. Upon completion of practicums, diary entries were collected from the participants via email.

Diary entries were studied individually and cross-referenced for similarities or differences using Braun and Clarke's (2006) guidance to thematic analysis. It was on the basis of the individual diary entries that the second interview questions were devised to allow for further exploration of experiences, relevant to the research question. The questions were, therefore, a mixture of broader questions asked to all four participants, such as: how they found teaching in that school and year group, what was their relationship with their mentor and colleagues like, how did this experience of practicum differ from past experiences and their awareness and experiences of gender within their course and practicums since their participation in the research began. Questions were also asked that allowed a follow-up on specific entries unique to each participant.

All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed by the principal researcher using participant pseudonyms; all identifying features of themselves or their practicums were redacted in order to preserve the anonymity of themselves and others. Thematic analysis was carried out inductively i.e. driven by the data rather than pre-conceived concepts (Braun and Clarke 2006). Due to the different time points of data collection, familiarisation and coding of the first interviews began before data from diaries and second interviews had been collected; however, the process for each dataset was the same. Once having developed a familiarity and deeper understanding of the data, the principal author began to code using the process of 'complete coding', i.e. working through the individual data items and annotating any pieces of data believed to be of relevance. Once completed for each transcribed interview, codes were evaluated and modified where appropriate. The same process was repeated for all transcripts.

Similar codes were grouped together to form initial themes. Closer sifting and sorting of the data chunks helped with theme refinement. For example, gender was a feature of the data, but two identified candidate themes relating to this were *Disadvantages of Gender* and *Advantages of Gender*, which tell us more about how gender was relevant. All themes were discussed by the research team at regular intervals until agreed by all.

## Analysis

The analysis identified an overarching theme of *Gender Difference* which will be the focus here, reflected in three inter-related themes. '*Men are from Mars*'; '*Gendered Support*'; '*Masculine Burden*'.

### *Men are from Mars*

Participants often referred to awareness of their gender which manifested in their experience of being unable to fully assimilate, particularly during their practicums. They denoted being cognisant of the implications of their minority position and how this shaped their behaviour and informed their experiences. Straight White British men experiencing themselves in the minority position sits in dissonance with the larger context in which the data was collected; Western cultures historically and currently privilege those who identify in such a way. Regardless, the participants draw attention to this and make gender a significant issue is important in their experience.

Minority status matters because often this indicates individuals who feel they are experiencing unequal treatment (Mpofu and Conyers 2004). Holding a 'minority status', even numerically, will undoubtedly impact the experiences of male primary school teachers. Indeed, the participants comment on the lack of males in the workplace, 'I went into school and there was, like there was like two other males in the whole school' (Steven, I2) and on their course, 'the first day I walked in I was expecting to be one of the only males there, but I was still surprised at how few there were' (Peter, I1), showing an acute awareness of minority status. Dan comments on this when acknowledging his choice of a numerically female-dominated course:

Dan: Er, well I just thought it'd be er difficult to get lad mates because there won't be that many [...] And you have to get on with them as well [...] So there's very few and if you don't get on with them then, you're not going to have many mates on your course (I1)

Int. Interviewer, I1 = First interview, I2 = Second interview

Dan's reasoning displays the binary way in which he views his own gender and its compatibility with the opposite gender, implying friendships with women on his course would not share the same connection or hold the same reverence and illustrating the notion of 'homo-sociality' (see Hjalmarsson and Löfdahl 2014, 286). Fred denotes that 'you get to know the lads first because that's just what happens when you meet a new group of people' (I1), contributing to the rhetoric that men actively seek out men's company over women's. Although it can be seen as a logical solution to reduce feelings of minority status by seeking the company of other males, this may work to perpetuate their minority experiences when, given the numerical domination of females, they are likely faced with the situation in which there are no other men to seek out. Instead, it may offer more long-term benefits to attempt to build professional relationships with all colleagues (Cruickshank, Kerby, and Baguley 2021).

Furthermore, Dan describes male and female conversations, a cornerstone of friendship, as inherently different:

Dan: Because the girls always talk about girl stuff

Int.: What kind of girl stuff?

Dan: Periods (laughs) [...] They do yeah, they were talking about periods the other day [...] And er, and boys (laughs) [...] Periods and boys (I1)

'Female conversation' is presented to be inaccessible to Dan; the labelling of 'girl stuff' suggests a frivolity of topics on which he is to have little to no input or desire to contribute



to. It is reported by the media and policymakers that men often reject primary school teaching as ‘it’s a female dominated area, so men feel isolated’ (Tabberer 2002, 6). The examples presented above suggest this experience begins even before entering the teaching environment. Given that research suggests men are more likely than women to cease teaching training courses prior to completion (Moyle and Cavendish 2001; Skelton 2009), this is an important consideration and may hold practical implications as to how tutors and course leaders are able to adjust their practices to account for this.

During practicums, participants described how they felt on the margins, marked by their inability to engage with or take an interest in certain conversations. Staffroom conversations were often identified as highlighting their minority status; Peter assigned his feelings of alienation as a result of his female colleagues holding gendered conversations, excluding the opposite sex:

[The] junior school is very heavily dominated by female staff, with the only male teacher being in year three and one male TA in a year five class. This can be frustrating as I often [find] myself unable to properly engage with conversation during our free time such as lunch. Much of this conversation is generally based around how the teachers leave their partners at home to go play bingo together, wedding planning, or pregnancies; all of which I don’t have much of an input on. (Diary entry)

This experience is commonly found in research concerning men in numerically female-dominated spaces (e.g. Ashcraft and Sevier 2006; Cushman 2005; Deneen 2011; Parker and Crabtree 2014; Sargent 2001); participants construct differences as gendered, rather than the variation between individuals. Previous research suggests that male primary school teachers have often felt isolated due to their lack of positive professional relationships and subsequently left teaching (Cushman 2007; Thornton and Bricheno 2006).

Further awareness of their gender comes in the participants’ experiences of the roles self-ascribed and assigned to them by female peers and colleagues; men are positioned frequently within the data as being active. Expectations are placed upon males from female peers to be energetic and sporty (Cruickshank et al. 2020; Skelton 2009; Smith 2008). Fred and Steven commented on how they were willing to take up this role, adhering to orthodox ideas of what it is to be a ‘real man’ (Mills, Haase, and Charlton 2008, 71):

Fred: Yeah, I think they like try and push you to more the sporty side. Which for me doesn’t bother me [...] But the other lad that I was on placement with the first-time round, so I had to lead him to that and he was like, I don’t play sport, I’m a musician [...] So there’s like, a straight away they tried to stereotype him with a sport (I1)

Steven’s diary entry:

Since the beginning of placement, I have been given the responsibility of teaching my class PE (Physical Education) on a Thursday. Until this week I had not realised that I am the only non-specialist teacher that teaches PE [...] I feel as one of the only other males in school I have been given the job of this just because I do sport.

Dan’s diary entry:

Staff bias- Staff are expecting me to plan for outside games as well as plan my lessons for class, although this isn’t my role and I am not receiving planning time where I should be.

Although the participants consistently note that these expectations placed on them are specific to their gender and correspond with hegemonic masculinity (Connell 1995), it is only Fred who reports this stereotyping to be of detriment to his colleague. This enables us to see how gendered experiences are not always negative, however, in cherry-picking which gendered expectations are deemed acceptable, ultimately weakens the ability to challenge gendered stereotyping throughout the role. As such, the performance of 'blue jobs' also needs to be challenged by both pre-service and established colleagues.

### ***Gendered support***

During the participants' second practicums, they were expected to teach approximately seventy percent of the teaching timetable compared to their previous practicum of twenty five percent. Unsurprisingly, the participants noted the strain this put on them and expressed the difficulties of managing an increased workload. Three of the four participants noted how there was a lack of support in place for them and suggested that certain aspects of their lack of support to be gender-related. Peter describes his experience within his diary entry:

I feel like if I was a full-time member of staff and showed my emotions more, like the female members of staff tend to, then I wouldn't be getting the same blunt email replies from my mentor when I explain that I'm struggling and will need time away even if it is just for one day. (Diary entry)

Peter denotes how his experienced lack of support was inextricably linked to his gender, directly comparing himself to female staff members who are more emotionally expressive and thus are perceived to be struggling more. Research suggests that for male teachers, being viewed as 'overly sensitive' often leads to characterisations of effeminacy (Jones 2007; Skelton 2012). In keeping with this, Peter suggests that by being a man he was less able to show his emotions. However, as Peter upholds this version of masculinity, it acts as a barrier for him to receive help, evidencing the constraints of gendered expectations.

In Dan's diary entry, he denotes 'no one really asks if I'm okay or how I'm coping with the practicum, despite this being my first SEN practicum and a difficult school working in the most difficult class'. During the second interview he expands on this:

Dan: [...], I wasn't really getting support from my class teacher and towards the start of placement I was like, ok. But towards the end it was really beating me down [...] And it was really, really difficult. I was really struggling towards the end [...] Like, I was, I was actually really struggling and I would have appreciated someone saying, are you ok? Would you like some help at this point? But, erm, I wasn't getting that

Int.: Did you ever think of reaching out and saying, I'm finding this quite hard?

Dan: No (laughs) [...] Guys can't do that can they (laughs). We all, we all know that don't we [...] There's like a stigma for guys doing that, int there? [...] Erm, it's looked, you're just looked at differently if a guy says look, I'm really, I'm really stuck I need help and a girl says look I'm really, I actually really need your help with something. (I2)

Despite repeatedly putting emphasis on his struggle by consecutive use of an exclamatory phrase (e.g. 'really, really'), his decision to not seek support or express such feelings

openly drew on expectations of gendered behaviour. Hegemonic masculinity, among many things, has historically been defined by the ability to be self-reliant (Gough 2018). Dan's implicit suggestion is that to be viewed as 'less masculine' would be a negative perception. Evans and Jones (2008) have broadly categorised that male teachers who show characteristics traditionally associated with hegemonic masculinity, such as self-discipline, rationality and reason, are generally considered favourable and are viewed as 'super-heroes', supporting Dan's concerns that masculine traits are valued.

Dan's perception of others' gendered judgements effectively polices his behaviour and suggests an inflexibility to gender that, although aware of, he does not (feel equipped to) challenge. Inevitably, this will have an impact on their professional identities, in which in this example leaves them feeling unsupported.

Given that these experiences reflect existing patterns in the literature from two decades ago (e.g. Mulholland and Hansen 2003; Thornton 1999), training for both male pre-service teachers and mentors on practicums should promote awareness of potential gender-specific areas of support that may be needed in order to aid an equality of experience within teaching and to promote gender flexibility.

### **Masculine Burden**

Men who engage in primary teaching are paradoxically feminised and positioned as 'sexual initiators or aggressors' (Moosa and Bhana 2020, 3). Unsurprisingly, male primary teachers have reported they feel reluctant to comfort and interact with their young pupils in the ways their female peers can (Gosse 2011) and show concern about the opinions of peers if they were to engage in reassuring physical behaviours such as a hug (Szwed 2010).

Peter described an event in which he was unable to help a female pupil change her medical bag, a situation he recognised as being both self and socially policed:

I was aware though that as a male, I couldn't help her with this [...] I have a young niece who is of a similar age and have cared for her in a similar way many times before [...], so this situation is nothing new to me. Despite this though, because I am a male, in the professional setting I'm not allowed to give this girl help. (Diary entry)

Peter noted his competency for the task, further drawing attention to it being his gender that was inhibiting him from assisting a pupil, obliquely acknowledging the anxieties surrounding male (primary) teachers and female pupils that overshadow ability and competence.

In his following interview, he further iterated this implicit distrust towards male teachers:

Peter: It's just something that I know [...] Like, I was surprised that I was even allowed to be in the room whilst they were getting changed for P.E. because previously I've had to leave the room [...] Because there's girls in there getting changed (I2)

Peter later described that transgressing the understood boundaries would result in 'a stern warning' (I2).

In another instance, Fred described an incident of having experienced mistrust from a colleague, providing an example of how male primary teachers are policed by others:

Fred: [...] she told the head teacher that I was in the classroom while they were getting changed ... and so was the other girl that was on the course, and erm the next time they were getting changed for PE I had to wait outside [...] 'cause she said that me being in the classroom was inappropriate when the girls were getting changed yet when the boys were getting changed ... like the other [female] trainee could stay in the classroom [...]

This 'disparity in enforcement' (Sargent 2001, 141) highlights the underlying anxieties surrounding male teachers as hypersexual beings (Moosa and Bhana 2020). Research by Cruickshank (2019) found similar patterns of 'gendered double standards' (250) in which physical touch was normalised for female peers and 'creepy' for male peers. Cushman (2005) notes how policies on physical contact were often not followed by female staff members. Furthermore, Fred noted how he believed he 'probably did the right thing' by choosing not to assist a female pupil: in an example of self-policing, he showed his awareness of the appropriate behaviours available to male primary school teachers. Fred later noted the absence of an explicit reason when he questions the decision, being told, 'I just have to do it this way' (11).

Within Dan's narrative, he expressed an importance to keep physical contact with pupils to a minimum as he found it 'unsettling', with an emphasis on the female pupils:

Dan: It was erm ... like, er, there was a, there was a young girl and she like wanted to sit on my knee and things like that and I'm not comfortable with that really.

[...]

I don't mind so much when they get a bit older, but it's just like, how everyone else sees it I suppose. It's more self-conscious (12)

As has been found in other studies of male primary school teachers (e.g. Ashcraft and Sevier 2006), Dan was acutely aware that physical interaction with children can engender mistrust from others and potentially hold more serious consequences. Particularly, Dan commented upon the age of the pupils being a factor, as typically younger children are viewed as in need of more physical nurture yet the age disparity is greater, and thus the perceived opportunity to take advantage is greater.

Underpinning the participants' experiences is the threat of accusations, and the understanding that male teachers would be treated differently from their female peers in such an event. Research supports participants' anxieties that men working with young children are much more likely to be treated as suspicious and viewed as sexual deviants (Bhana and Moosa 2016; Mills, Haase, and Charlton 2008; Smith 2008). The adjustments made by male teachers to counter such pitfalls (e.g. policing of physical play and caring duties) undoubtedly impact upon their experience and enjoyment of teaching, as well as their ability to be professionally able to offer care and support to their students. Furthermore, self and other policing of male teachers in this way fails to challenge stereotypes and encourages women to be seen as primary caregivers and nurturers.

## Discussion

Although the participants' accounts were not homogeneous, they all shared the experience of being in a minority position, prompting their gender to shape their experiences and become a prominent feature in their role as pre-service teachers. It was evident in the

data that *both* genders were complicit in reproducing traditional gendered roles within the context of teaching (Dillabough 1999). Although participants expressed their awareness that the division of 'blue jobs' was heavily stereotyped, such as the expectation of the male pre-service teachers to lead sports, their inability to challenge these positions was demonstrated by their uptake of the roles regardless and highlights the difficulty they faced in challenging these prescribed roles.

Throughout experiences on the course and during practicum, the men drew attention to the sense of disconnection they felt with female peers and difficulty building friendships; they highlighted how their female counterparts offered different types of friendship and often inaccessible conversation topics. Participants instead recounted seeking out other male teachers and men within their course; elsewhere termed 'homosociality' (Hjalmarsson and Löfdahl 2014, 286).

Participants also recounted their avoidance of help-seeking due to the inconsistency of such behaviours with masculinities; gendered constructs serve to negatively impact the experiences of male teachers and can contribute to feelings of isolation in an environment where they already exist as the (numerical) minority (Ashcraft and Sevier 2006; Cushman 2005). The analysis also presents the mistrust levelled towards the male pre-service teachers (re)producing participants' internal policing when instances of physical touch and care were presented; but there were also instances of overt policing by their colleagues. Needless to say, the inconsistency in the way male and female teachers are treated only serves to widen the gap between the constructions of male and female teachers (Sargent 2001), which enforce limitations on the way men are able to perform teaching and reproduce gendered stereotypes to the pupils in their care.

Although a small-scale study, we are afforded an insight into the gendered culture that exists within schools: the data suggest that the participants felt it difficult, if not impossible, to resist stereotyped positions. Falling into gender-relational roles within such a context undermines the progressive potential of men entering primary school teaching. Social spaces within schools, such as the staffroom, are also spaces that can perpetuate gendered cultures and feelings of isolation for those in the numerical minority; mentors on practicums, course leaders and tutors should be mindful of this and make adjustments accordingly to retain male primary teachers (Skelton 2009).

Based on the data, it may therefore be important to consider what we teach pre-service teachers throughout their undergraduate course about the potential impacts of their gender. In keeping with this, the data suggests it may also be pertinent to consider the training of mentors within schools and to pay further attention to the suitability of practicums for pre-service teachers. Similarly, Carrington and McPhee (2008) concluded that matters such as 'male disaffection from school' (188) should be addressed by professional development programmes focusing on education inequalities.

Perhaps the most promising allusion to a positive change within the current constructs of masculinities was the participants' *awareness* of many gendered enactments; there was also an engagement with *why* there was an expectation of the male (pre-service) teachers to fulfil or enact certain behaviours. However, having this awareness and not necessarily having the tools to challenge it did undoubtedly lead to an uptake in such behaviours. Perhaps then the next step is to address how we can provide men with the toolkit to challenge gendered assumptions and what limits them in doing so currently, both internally and externally: we should aim to support men 'transgressing' the gender boundary lines

so that they, in turn, can encourage a movement away from stereotypical gendered roles to the children they teach (Cushman 2005).

### **Limitations and future research**

This study did not take into account the intersectionality of the participants, which limits the scope of understanding and interpreting individuals' experiences. Given the wealth of research demonstrating the negative associations of, in particular, gay men and primary school teaching (e.g. King 1998; Kirby and Michaelson 2015; Toledo and Maher 2019), it is highly likely our data would be shaped differently with the inclusion of gay participants. Our participants also all identified as White, thus this research cannot offer a perspective on how experiences may differ when viewed through the lens of race: Callender's (2018; 2020) research focuses specifically on the experiences of Black teachers in England and suggests Black men may be further impacted by negative stereotypes. Thus, further research may find it pertinent to include the participants' intersecting identities, in order to better understand the participants and the implications of the data. Previous research has shown that adherence to hegemonic masculinities differs in accordance with such factors (Mahalik et al. 2001; Liu 2002; Smiler 2006; Wester, Pionke, and Vogel 2005; Wester et al. 2006).

Moreover, future research may find it valuable to compare the experiences of male pre-service teachers with those of female pre-service teachers, supporting the attempts to interrogate gender in ways that benefit everyone.

### **Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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