

Men in primary teaching and initial teacher education

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ABSTRACT

Through examination of the year-long PGCE (Postgraduate Certificate of Education) UK teacher training programmes, a disparity can be recognised as existing between the numbers of male and female student teachers on initial teacher education (ITE) courses. Over five times more women than men embarked on primary ITE courses (teaching children between 3 and 11 years old) in September 2019 (DfE, 2019) and the number and proportion of men undertaking training has been falling over the last five years. Perhaps most significantly for ITE providers, a higher percentage of men than women fail to complete their training within the ten-month programme and thus to gain qualified teacher status (QTS). This paper sets out perceptions and potential experiences of male primary student teachers and the impact of intervention measures taken by two providers of ITE to address the issues to improve completion rates. The argument is made for promoting ongoing support combined with structured input and opportunities for male student teachers to discuss research and documented challenges faced by male teachers in an often female-dominated environment.

INTRODUCTION

This paper explores perceptions and experiences of male primary school teachers, through discussion of themes from research literature. We highlight factors influencing male student teachers' motivations, experiences and training, and how support for effective induction of men into careers

as primary school teachers may be facilitated. We also highlight the importance of this induction extending to all colleagues, regardless of gender. We commence with the background to issues facing men in primary teaching, before setting out themes which exemplify perceptions and experiences of male student teachers training in England.

KEYWORDS

MEN

MALE

PRIMARY

TEACHER TRAINING

ITE

PGCE

QTS

ECT

BACKGROUND

For decades a persistent imbalance between male and female teachers in UK primary schools has attracted academic, political and media scrutiny. Numerous calls for more men in primary schools have been made by professional and governmental bodies, including the Secretary of State for

Education in 1998, the Teacher Training Agency in 2003 and the Training and Development Agency for Schools (BBC, 2005). More recently, several questions have been put to the Secretary of State for Education regarding recruitment of men into primary teacher roles (see e.g. House of Commons Library, 2022), to which the broad response has been to outline the support provided for diverse recruitment and retention of teachers. These questions and calls for the recruitment of more men in primary teaching have had minimal impact, with current levels at 14% of all nursery (0–4 years) and primary (4–11 years) school teachers in England being male (DfE, 2022). This disparity amounts to almost 180,000 more female teachers than male in England’s nurseries and primary schools.

This disparity is reflected in the numbers of men on ITE courses leading to qualified teacher status. Over five times more women than men embark on a primary ITE course each September, until the following July. For the last few years 84% of all new entrants to postgraduate ITE have been female (DfE, 2019; 2023), while the percentage of men undertaking ITE has consistently fallen over the last decade. Perhaps most significantly for ITE providers, higher percentages of male than female students fail to complete their ITE course in the expected time frame (usually September – July) (DfE, 2022). For this reason alone, we need to understand factors preventing successful course completion and facilitate proactive steps to support male student teachers towards QTS.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This evident persistence of imbalance in recruitment and training suggests that the challenges faced by males entering a female-dominated profession are yet to be fully understood or acted upon. To make sense of the complex influences on male teacher recruitment, training and work, this paper draws on an interdisciplinary theoretical framework

(McGrath *et al.*, 2020) devised to support discussion of and research into male teacher recruitment through four interrelated levels: the child (prompting consideration of the development of children’s gender knowledge through their experiences observing men in their class and school), the classroom (where interpersonal relationships reveal aspects of the homophilic tendency of individuals to form friendships with those like themselves), the organisation (the impact of a school’s workforce diversity on policy and male teachers’ experiences), and society (that sees masculinity and femininity as dynamic, social constructions). All four levels have validity but to better understand the student teacher perspective, we focus on the primary school setting and therefore the framework’s organisational lens.

THE ORGANISATION: WORKFORCE GENDER DIVERSITY

Student teachers find themselves affected by, but with little or no control over, factors which influence their school experiences. They experience gender as an issue of attitudes within an organisation, rather than of individuals per se (Mistry & Sood, 2013). But their teacher identity is shaped by the ‘powerful gender discourses that operate’ (Woodfine, 2018). Measures to foster diverse and inclusive workplaces in a school, reflective of its broader community, have been seen to positively impact employee job satisfaction and performance (Pitts, 2009, cited in McGrath *et al.*, 2020).

However, in primary schools gender groups are often numerically imbalanced. Where one social category consists of less than 20% of the total, ‘tokenism’ may be experienced (Kanter, 1977; McGrath *et al.*, 2020; Woodfine, 2018). The challenges for male teachers are reflected in those of any ‘token’ group and are likely to involve certain perceptual phenomena which result in a group member’s characteristics overshadowing their performance:

Visibility (tokens capture a disproportionate awareness share),

polarisation (differences between tokens and dominants are exaggerated) and *assimilation* (tokens’ attributes are distorted to fit pre-existing generalisations about their social type). (Kanter, 1977: 965)

Visibility

As their numerical proportion reduces, so tokens capture a larger awareness share per dominant member. A sole male teacher in a primary school becomes immediately recognisable and their attributes more likely to be noticed. This has several implications. For instance, tokens may be afraid of exhibiting outstanding performance capabilities, to avoid heightening attention, and find themselves in a paradox of needing to perform highly to be seen as competent and accepted, but experiencing hostility rather than being rewarded for doing so. Reaction to this hostility might result in a male teacher’s additional effort and explicit promotion of their achievements, though Kanter’s study suggests tokens were more likely to limit their visibility, by keeping a low profile.

Polarisation

Polarisation stems from raised awareness of commonalities and differences, and the reaction of majority group members to them. Studies document various behaviours, ranging from subtle (social isolation, neglect), through unprofessional (withholding information) to overtly offensive (ridicule) by the dominant groups. In some cases, studies document token members of groups being seen to play along, to provide a source of humour for majority group members. This behaviour demonstrates willingness to accept the dominant culture as a coping mechanism.

Assimilation

Assimilation is essentially stereotyping. The way that dominant members of a group perceive the attributes and characteristics of token members distorts to fit pre-existing assumptions about them. This tendency, possibly

occurring during initial encounters, can result in judgements – both positive and negative – being made about a male student teacher’s status, experience, capability, potential and motivation. Documented issues with mis-assimilation into professional communities of practice include token members resigning themselves to the status roles they are assigned, as challenging them can be complicated and uncomfortable. They may even embody the distorted views and feign weakness, disorganisation, or other attributes – negative or positive – ascribed to them.

DISCUSSION OF THEMES

From exploration of literature related more specifically to the male primary student teacher, the following themes of identity and perception emerge and will be used to develop the discussion:

- **Identity construction:** constructed through experiences and interactions with people within a particular professional context
- **Identity bruising:** occurs when the identity that an individual has constructed for themselves is questioned
- **Experiences of others’ perceptions:** ‘others’ refers to stakeholders within this context including children, colleagues and peers.

IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION AND BRUISING

An individual’s identity is essentially about having a ‘sense of self’ in a particular role or context (Smedley, 2006). The basics of this identity are initially constructed by the individual themselves, based on their background, beliefs, culture and experiences, to name but a few of the influences which can shape a person’s character. An individual’s identity is further constructed and can move away from their own ‘sense of self’ through interactions with others in a particular

context. This can explain why some male student teachers can have an idea of their own identity based on their previous experiences and background and have to alter it to fit into a new context. The period of early professional development represents uncertainty, as students embark upon their pre-teacher identity construction (Jones, 2007).

Day *et al.* (2007, cited in Skelton, 2009) identified three ‘dimensions of identity’ following their study of 300 male teachers: professional identity (relating to national policies), situated identity (the context in which the teacher is currently working) and personal identity (a teacher’s personal background, life and how this might impact on how they carry out their role). It would seem that at any one time in a student teacher’s construction of their ‘professional’ identity, their own and others’ ideas of their identity could be vying for attention – sometimes complementing each other, sometimes contradicting each other – and that this can become a challenge.

‘Identity bruising’ refers to any interaction which might challenge the identity an individual has created for themselves or that they are confident with (Foster & Newman, 2005). Given that the ITE year can be an intense and therefore vulnerable time, this bruising can come at a critical point and could make the difference in whether trainees complete their ITE course. Unfortunately, research suggests that males are less likely to seek help or utilise the support available (Brember, Brown & Ralph, 2002). They find certain areas more stressful than others, whereas females feel consistently more stressed but are more effective at dealing with it.

EXPERIENCES OF PERCEPTIONS

There are patterns of evidence of particular perceptions about men going into primary school teaching in the first place. Smedley (2006) stated that the motives for men becoming teachers were automatically questioned and, depending

on their reasons, were perceived in particular ways. For instance, being perceived as male before being perceived as a good teacher (Foster & Newman, 2005); having career aspirations; becoming role models for boys; being supportive of girls with no ‘father figure’; good at behaviour management within the primary classroom; sporty & willing to run a football club as an extra-curricular activity; won’t talk if things go wrong; will teach older primary-aged children; need ‘mothering’; will be disorganised; good at fixing computers; will move furniture; will walk into a teaching job; will go straight into a primary school management position such as assistant or deputy headteacher (Foster & Newman, 2005; McGrath *et al.*, 2020; Smedley & Pepperwell, 2000).

Perceptions of the inevitability of rapid role progression towards school leadership (Skelton, 2009) were explicitly experienced. The idea of employability being guaranteed is a perception which trainees experience and, while on the surface, this could be a case of positive discrimination, Foster (1993: 37, cited in Warwick, Warwick & Hopper, 2012) identified male teachers as being ‘privileged and disadvantaged’ due to assumptions about walking into senior leadership posts or going straight into school management. These examples are echoed in the work of Lynch (1994, cited in Skelton, 2009, p. 23), ‘women teach and men manage’, and extended by Skelton (2009), demonstrating there is a perception that men will automatically go on to leadership and management roles in education.

Some often-proposed reasons for having more male teachers in primary and early years education (e.g., that male primary teachers make good male role models or that young children need a father figure) are disputed (McGrath *et al.*, 2020; Smedley & Pepperwell, 2000). These claims seem to rest on an assumption that male teachers are in some way necessary to address masculinity which is

somehow threatened by skewed gender ratios. However, the characteristics of a potential 'role model' are rather more ambiguous and are not absolutely linked to teachers of specific gender, but may be represented by celebrities, relatives, musicians or sports personalities (McGrath *et al.*, 2020).

It is important to draw the distinction between the perceptions of male trainees as outlined above and the perceptions of their own experiences (Bosworth, 2015).

CONCLUSIONS

Conclusions from this discussion of male primary teachers' experiences must be framed by the reality of a gendered profession, constructed by historical, philosophical and political drivers (Nias & Nias, 1989). How masculinity is represented or perceived is 'both a product and a process of broader societal constructions' (McGrath *et al.*, 2020: 157). Representative diversity is often sought by institutions and, in gender terms, increasing male representation can help to break down stereotypical polarisation and ease pressures driven by the 'visibility' of those in token groups.

The roles of ITE tutors and school-based staff are pivotal. All student teachers require effective gender neutral induction and socialisation into their professional training environment. Given the 'token polarisation' as framed in the work of McGrath *et al.* (2020), this is just as important for female school colleagues to be aware of so that they can potentially minimise the identity bruising which may occur. Teacher mentors, who work with the student teachers in schools, are supremely placed to model management strategies for the acknowledgement and management of work-related stress and pressure, modelling openness and the value of seeking support. They must be able to be perceived as supportive, provide time and clarity of expectations and avoid snap judgements about their student teacher's ability to 'make it'. Some literature suggests that male student

teachers might specifically benefit from mentoring by an experienced male teacher. The inevitable variety in what support is perceived as of value re-emphasises the complexity of the position of men entering primary or early years education settings.

THE ORGANISATIONAL LEVEL: WORKFORCE GENDER IDENTITY

The impact of the diversity of an organisation's workforce is more significant than male student teachers necessarily having male mentors. Whether a student has a male or female mentor, or engages in inclusive professional and social activities of varying frequency and nature, it is impossible to draw anything but generalisations about what might help all male trainee teachers. It is, however, possible to make future trainees aware of when and where they might need to access appropriate support throughout their training. To reiterate the previously made point, availability and accessibility of support on a teacher training course can make a significant difference to its successful completion (Warwick, Warwick & Hopper, 2012).

To revisit the work of McGrath *et al.* (2020) and the notion of 'tokenism', it is worth noting that 'visibility', 'polarisation' and 'assimilation' could all be brought into the cognisance of the wider teaching profession. This highlighting of potential barriers could then be solved by the many and not just felt by the few.

Current organisational and social structures perpetuate a notion that primary teaching is not for men, such that the imbalance in recruitment and retention of males, referred to at the start of this paper, is likely to be in evidence for years to come.

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDED SUPPORT WITHIN THE PROFESSIONAL CONTEXT

- Sharing research with the ITE partnership of primary schools in order to inform students and mentors of the challenges male student teachers might face, to help minimise cases of identity bruising
- Formalisation of support groups with a structure to include an agenda and the opportunities for:
 - input from qualified teachers from partnership schools about their experiences of gender-related perceptions and expectations, both in university and in school placements, across the PGCE training year, to be contributed to by all male students
 - inclusion of female perspectives for the support group
- Provision of support on a continuous basis – as opposed to a reactive one – through identification of periods throughout ITE where male trainees feel the most pressure. ■

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