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Teaching lads' lads and girly-girls: why recognising and tackling gender stereotypes *still* matters in education

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ABSTRACT

Teachers' representations of femininities and masculinities were examined to consider how their understandings of gender might impact upon the developing gender constructions of the children they teach. In interviews, teachers reflected on their gender construction in their personal lives as well as how this impacted on their displayed attitudes to gender within their pedagogy. Findings suggest that teachers made associations between femininity, nurture and physical appearance, and, in contrast, associated masculinity with physical strength, enjoyment of sport, and the role of financial provider. Although one might assume that gender stereotypes are dated and that contemporary British society has moved beyond such discourses, the data suggests that limiting binary gender stereotypes perpetuate, and with them the possibility that teachers might still be constraining their pupils' opportunities. Having reflected in this way, the teachers in this sample presented as more inclined to modify their practice for an increased focus on equality.

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Introduction

This article, written by two researchers who are also qualified primary school teachers, aims to illustrate the pervading nature of gender stereotypical understandings of femininities and masculinities and to better illustrate the potential influence this may still have on the implicit messages passed on to pupils by their teachers. By exploring the underlying perceptions of femininities and masculinities of a sample group of primary school teachers, this research provides insight into how gender stereotypes may unwittingly perpetuate, asking:

- What understandings do teachers have of masculinities and femininities?
- What issues do teachers raise when reflecting on their own gender constructions?
- How do these understandings manifest in their expectations for their own and others' (particularly children's) behaviour?

This article also demonstrates how the process of reflection can be used by professionals to challenge preconceptions and more consciously promote gender equality with their pupils.

Martin and Ruble (2004) suggest that most children learn the relevance of their own gender at around two years old. The toys that young children play with and the activities that they are encouraged to take part in are often affected by societally created gender stereotypes (Francis 2010). This

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can not only result in different, gender-based experiences, but in the development of different sets of skills (Eliot 2018). These early impacts can be lasting, influencing the development of interests in specific, gendered occupations that can endure into adulthood (Hayes, Bigler, and Weisgram 2018), and, more importantly, can constrain ambitions (Eccles 2009; Francis 2002).

Studies carried out relatively recently continue to suggest that some children restrict their ambitions based upon their gender (Eccles 2009; Francis 2002), and this is certainly something that was a reality within the authors' lifetimes. Regardless of current discourses of equality, the messages that children receive about gender from those closest to them, particularly in their homes and schools, can widen their horizons or, equally, impede them in later life. It is for these reasons, we argue that teachers *still* need to be aware of implicit messages that they may be conveying to those children in their care, and the impact that those messages can have. Additionally, those researching gender and education should be aware of the potentially limiting binary understandings of gender *still* held by some teachers.

Literature review

How gender is constructed

Butler (1990) asks whether gender is constructed coercively and why deviations from gender 'norms' are so troubling to some. They suggest there is a deep fear, or anxiety, which tells individuals you must comply with gender norms or else risk exclusion or abuse. For pedagogues, this is pertinent because it suggests that teachers may play a role in encouraging pupils to comply with these gender 'norms'. Butler (1990) argues that we have desires which stem from social norms rather than our own innate individuality, echoing the thinking of Foucault (1979) who suggests that normalising power makes us want to do what we have to do, believing that these are our own ideas. These theories suggest that teachers hold the power to create an atmosphere of tolerance or acceptance in their classrooms or potentially to add to the tapestry of stereotypes. Butler (1990) proposes that by repetitively performing certain ritualistic acts, one feels more feminine or masculine. In primary school, this could include the wearing of a school summer dress or pair of shorts, playing football or making up a dance during playtime, choosing from a selection of fairy or beast books in the school library. This public performance, Butler (1990) argues, then becomes part of the inter-nalised gender construction of the individual.

Contemporary understandings of gender norms can be considered as socially constructed truths of the day or 'Regimes of truth' (Foucault 1977, 30). Teachers coming of age in the 1970s may have a significantly different experience to those growing up in the 2000s. Although we may believe that our morals, our values and our choices are of our own making, they are a product of our prior experiences and very much of the time and geography of our existence (Berger and Luckmann 1966). This suggests that teachers' lived experiences will vary hugely and that their understanding of societal norms and attitudes to gender roles will be affected by these individual experiences: the time and place in which they grew up (and the political landscape at the time), as well as the people who influenced them, the media they consumed and the key events which shaped them. We sought to contribute to knowledge in this area with the first two research questions:

What understandings do teachers have of masculinities and femininities?

What issues do teachers raise when reflecting on their own gender constructions?

The role that schools play in defining gender

Studies suggest that it is in the first years of schooling that binary gendered attitudes and expectations about what it is to be a boy or a girl really become significant (Paechter 2007; Thorne 1993; Walkerdine 1998). Through the primary years, boys' and girls' peer cultures become

established, with clear differences between the two (Goble et al. 2012). Lamb et al. (2009) observe that peers consciously ‘teach’ their classmates stereotypes and punish them for failing to conform to them, they but also note that intervention by educators has enabled young children to recognise and challenge their peers’ sexist remarks.

Schools have been described as ‘active makers of a range of femininities and masculinities’ (Mac an Ghail 1994, 9), as children are regulated within the classroom and to some extent on the playground. Though peers have a role to play here, educators also have a significant role in establishing the atmosphere and culture within a school with regard to attitudes towards gender (Martino and Rezai-Rashti 2012). After observing large numbers of children in a variety of scenarios, Bigler and Liben (2007) went so far as to suggest that teacher input can significantly impact the development of prejudices amongst pupils.

Teachers, amongst many other socialising factors, may continue to support gender-stereotypical messages, which build on the early construction of gender that has taken place in the home and early years settings (Duffy, Warren, and Walsh 2001; Fromberg 2005; Gunderson et al. 2012). Teachers have been observed using different language with boys and girls at nursery school; girls continue to receive more terms of endearment and girls’ appearance and clothing are more regularly discussed than boys’ (Chick, Heilman-Houser, and Hunter 2002). Even those educators who believe they treat pupils fairly regardless of their gender, may be susceptible to such preconceptions. In one example, Wingrave (2018) observed that a group of early years’ teachers, who believed that they did not create a gendered environment and as professionals they do not gender, universally accepted claims that girls are better able to express their feelings and that boys were more physically active.

It has been suggested that within the classroom, even competent and experienced teachers are often unaware of the implicit and explicit gendered messages they pass on through teaching and learning (De Groot Kim 2011). Myhill and Jones (2006) suggest that teachers take to their classrooms stereotypical assumptions and expectations which may influence their pupils’ construction of gender, which Francis (2000) suggests can affect the way they interact and communicate with pupils. Carlana (2019) suggests that pupils’ mathematical performance may be affected by the gender stereotypical attitudes of their teachers, with girls performing more strongly when they have teachers who hold more egalitarian views and Retelsdorf, Schwartz, and Asbrock (2015) suggest that boys’ confidence in their own reading abilities may be diminished by teachers who hold the view that girls are stronger readers than boys. Farago et al. (2022) argue that teachers who hold more traditional gender-role attitudes more frequently segregate children by gender and make gender salient, through the use of labels. It appears then that gender stereotypes understood by teachers can have affect the pupils they teach, and that teachers’ own prior exposure to gender stereotypes may shape their attitudes and practice.

Academic literature explores the potentially damaging impact that teachers gendered attitudes may have on their pupils and the implicit and explicit messages that can be present in teacher-pupil interaction, however there is no literature available which examines the source of these messages. Consequently, the third research question were derived which focused on teachers’ practice:

How do these understandings manifest in their expectations for their own and others’ behaviour?

When we combine the research findings that educators can influence their pupils’ gender constructions, with the evidence that gender stereotypes may constrain individuals’ behaviour and aspirations, the potential for teachers to unwittingly pass on gendered prejudices to their pupils (with the potential for long-term consequences) becomes clear. It is, therefore, necessary to understand the attitudes of teachers and from where these attitudes are derived.

Methodology

This research took a social constructionist approach, examining the views of a sample of teachers, to explore how they both perceive and perform gender. An interpretivist approach was taken with the

understanding that gender is individually and societally constructed (Butler 1990). Life history interviews were chosen as the most appropriate means of gathering data about teachers' attitudes to gender and the experiences which contributed to these attitudes (Brinkmann and Kvale 2018; King and Horrocks 2010). The interactive nature of the interview enabled the researcher, as interviewer, to ask open-ended questions, allowing the teachers to guide the interviews to discuss what they deemed most relevant. This allowed the participants to reflect on their own life history and share what they felt was pertinent, but importantly, what they were comfortable with discussing. This approach was selected with the view to revealing the issues that teachers raise when reflecting on their own gender constructions.

Goodson and Sikes (2001, 21) argue that life histories provide a tool to examine the social context of an individual's experience and that the method can be used to provide 'useful data on practically every social issue'. Therefore, this was a useful approach to explore the complexity of the individual experience of gender. Semi-structured individual interviews were conducted with teachers; the teachers were given time and space to reflect on how their own life experiences may have impacted their attitudes towards gender, and the implicit messages that they might convey through their pedagogy. Nine months after the initial interviews, the participants were contacted by email and asked to reflect on the nature of the interview and whether it had influenced their practice. Returning to the research questions, the interview schedule was designed to gather data about teachers' understandings of masculinities and femininities, how these manifest in their expectations for their own and others' behaviour and any further issues which teachers raised when reflecting on their own gender constructions. The interviews largely took a chronological narrative route with participants reflecting on their experiences from childhood, through adolescence and into adulthood. They discussed their earliest recollections of gender, who/what had influenced them at various stages and then reflected on their careers as educators and their current attitudes and practice.

Sample

These semi-structured individual interviews were conducted with fourteen teachers from five English primary schools (one in London and four in the Midlands). All teachers from the researcher's school were invited to participate (a large primary school in the Midlands). From the initial invitation to participate, 8 teachers quickly responded. This sample comprised 6 female and 2 male teachers, all white British between 26 and 42. This sample enabled comparison of the perspectives of different individuals in one setting. Since the culture and ethos of a school (Furner and McCulla 2019) can have an impact on the views of its teachers, it was valuable to compare the individual outlooks of a number of teachers. For a broader understanding, teachers from further schools in the city were also invited to participate. In line with BERA (2018) guidelines, this invitation was extended by way of an email to head teachers from a number of schools chosen for their contextual diversity. The head teachers acted as gatekeepers, choosing whether to become involved in the project and then inviting individual teachers to participate. This served to extend the size of the sample, providing more data, and had the additional advantage of introducing participants from other schools which could add further perspectives. The third sample came from a large primary school in London which had already been involved in a programme to promote gender equality. This school was approached as they had spent one year working with an organisation to focus on developing their curriculum and applying a whole school approach to gender, adjusting routines and practices. The head teacher was contacted by email and three teachers agreed to take part. This sample of 14 teachers was sufficient to provide an illustrative example of contemporary understandings. There are simply too many factors to ever select a sample which would exhaust the possibilities of all life histories, all backgrounds, ages and experiences. The researchers pragmatically concluded that the sample size was appropriate given the available resource (Robinson 2014). During the process of analysis, we concluded that further data collection was not necessary to aid the theory-development process (Strauss and Corbin 1998).

Ethical considerations

All formal ethical protocols were followed during the research, in line with the requirements of BERA (2018), with full ethical approval gained through the university prior to the research beginning. All research respondents were clearly informed about the purpose of the research, their role within that, what would happen with the research data and their right to withdraw at any point. The interviews were conducted in person or online, with time taken to put participants at ease, audio recorded and transcribed. Pseudonyms are used throughout.

To all potential participants, it was fully explained the role that they would play and potential risks and benefits of their participation before seeking their consent.

Researchers have a responsibility to consider how to balance maximising the benefits for, and minimising any risk or harm to, participants (Bloor 2010). The researchers were aware that a life history interview, which asked teachers to reflect on how incidents in their lives have shaped their views, may draw on difficult memories for some. To minimise the likelihood of this, the participants were clearly informed what the interview entailed beforehand. Precautions were taken to avoid any harmful impact in that privacy was assured (unless there was danger of harm to an individual) and support was prepared and offered to all interviewees prior to the interview.

Counter to the possibility of any negative effects, it was very much hoped that participants would benefit from the research in terms of insights gained in the process. Stern (2016) highlights the value of research in provoking an emotional response in the participants and the virtue of really listening to someone. This appeared to be the case, as at the end of the interviews, many of the participants shared how much they had enjoyed the conversation and its therapeutic nature.

Process of data analysis

The transcriptions of these life history interviews provided data which were rich in detail and context (Geertz 1973). Thematic interpretive analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006) was used to explore the ways that participants represented gender throughout the interviews, providing a systematic and rigorous approach to examining the qualitative data. The findings below are presented thematically, exploring the range of masculinities and femininities which were represented across the dataset with individual participants' perspectives presented and responding to the key questions:

- What understandings do teachers have of masculinities and femininities?
- What issues do teachers raise when reflecting on their own gender constructions?
- How do these understandings manifest in their expectations for their own and others' behaviour?

The rich data (Geertz 1973) provided individual accounts and perceptions of contemporary attitudes which are explored below and which are used to illustrate origins and implications of these attitudes. The themes which we drew from the data demonstrate both the pervading nature of some stereotypes (such as the 'caring' or 'beautified' female or the 'sporty' or 'breadwinner' male) but also contrary expectations (the strong yet nurturing mother, the conflicts involved in 'modern' masculinities).

Findings and discussion

The data provided insight into the nature of teachers' understandings of masculinities and femininities and the issues which teachers' felt pertinent when examining their own and others' gender. The data also exemplified ways in which these attitudes are carried into the classroom and manifest in the teachers' interactions with their pupils. It appeared that the teachers' understandings of masculinities and femininities were complex and individual, however there were common experiences and uses of language which could be described as gender stereotypical. The data showed that these attitudes held implications for the teachers' expectations for their own and their pupils' behaviour. They

commented on the ways in which this manifests in the classroom. For example, in how they addressed their pupils or organised their learning environments.

The themes which are discussed below were drawn from the data collected from this sample which may or may not exemplify the views of primary school teachers more widely.

The caring female

Almost all (13/14) of the participants spoke of their mothers' role in the home as caregivers: some with pride, some with gratitude and some as a warning to themselves to avoid the same trap. De Beauvoir's ([1949] 2011) position that the trappings of motherhood are social constructs that engineer the patriarchal oppression of women can be seen in the opinions of some of the participants, however the majority spoke in neutral or positive tones about their own and their mothers' experiences. Rosie made a flippant comment about her education and upbringing in 1970s Ireland, where the life skills she was taught prepared her 'to be a great little housewife'. Half of the participants remembered their mothers leaving paid work to raise children and more (12 out of the 14) described the role their mother played in the home as being more *present* in their childhood than their father, or taking on a more nurturing role. Sophie considered her mother's choice, explaining: 'She fell into the role of care giver My dad was the breadwinner. My mum was at home'. Sophie's language here, that her mother 'fell into' the role, could suggest some passivity, that cultural norms expected her to do this. Both Sophie and Lily described their mothers fulfilling a similar role in the home. Lily's associations with femininity and motherhood, in particular, centred around nurture which she seemed to admire in her mother and sought to emulate, explaining:

[Mum]'s a real feeder. She loves feeding people. When anyone arrives at the house, she feeds them. She cooks massive meals. I'm now like that. People come to my house; I want to cook. I like my house to be tidy.

However, Sophie was far less positive about such behaviours, describing them as subservient.

It has long been argued that the emotional labour of keeping others happy is perceived as a woman's job, both in the home and in the workplace (Hochschild 1989) and that the unpaid, often unnoticed work that goes into keeping everyone comfortable and content can be a continued burden for women (Hartley 2018). The data within this study suggest that, for some women, this is still the case. What is key here, though, is how these teachers, who had greater experience of women in the role of primary carer, might be more inclined to subconsciously pass on such messages to their pupils.

Appearance and femininity

The participants described their behaviour and their own understandings of femininities, including many pertaining to appearance. For the female participants, six mentioned their appearance almost immediately in the interview. Lily clarified, 'I suppose I'm kind of thinking as gender as two separate things. I'm thinking of it as your appearance and as your qualities as a person'. For most, wearing dresses and make-up played a part in feminine identity. Jackie explained that she saw herself as feminine in that she loved to wear, 'Dresses and bright colours', and Becky's interest in, 'Hair, make-up and all that jazz', was part of her feminine identity. Hannah explained how, in adulthood, she would reluctantly join her female friends in *feminine* activities, saying:

I haven't got my ears pierced, I don't really put too much make up on, I'm not one for really following fashions and going out and going on massive shopping sprees so I wouldn't say particularly feminine [My female friends] can persuade me to go on shopping trips now and again and go to a make-up counter and have a make-over and try something but yeah, I wouldn't go seeking it out, I guess.

Bradley (2013, 23) discusses how much time, money and effort is spent by women and girls in 'creating the bodily appearance of being feminine'. Applying make-up, styling hair, and choosing

appropriate attire could all be considered as part of the rituals undertaken in the performance of femininity. These rituals were referred to by several of the participants as part of their experience of womanhood and their understanding of femininity, even if not part of their own daily practice. The interviews strongly suggested that the pupils of these teachers may be receiving messages about femininity with potential implications for their future behaviour.

An undercurrent of *performance* and a desire to fit in with social norms is interwoven with physical representations of femininity. The coercive and darker side of the gendered performance can result in unpleasant consequences. Lily described how the pressure she felt to look a certain way resulted in some damaging behaviours, saying:

When I got to about 14 ... I basically I starved myself quite severely and had a bit of an eating disorder for a couple of years ... went very, very thin. And that's when the make-up came, the hair came, the glamour came and people would say to me, you look really good, you look amazing and I liked that so I kind of ... That's probably what started me loving being feminine and girly and looking feminine and girly.

Despite encouragement in her childhood from her mother to dress differently, Lena resisted and continued to wear trousers. She shared her determination to defy convention, and, in her teenage years, she recalled recognising an explicit association between portrayals of femininity and a desire to please others. Both Lily and Lena as teenage girls recognised that their childhood behaviour and style of dress no longer felt acceptable when they reached their teenage years. They each grappled with the implications of their own and others' appearance, before finding their own comfortable space in society and with their own performances of gender.

Paechter (2007) suggests that children show their membership of communities of masculinity and femininity practice through how the body is clothed. This data suggests that an undercurrent of performance and a desire to fit in with social norms remains interwoven with physical representations of femininity. Comments made by the teachers suggest that being the same as others within your peer group is a comfort. Beautification can be considered a positive and even empowering experience for women (Cahill 2003) though it may also be associated with objectification and an oppressive element of a patriarchal society (Bordo 1993). The data suggest that teachers may still be conveying to pupils are that girls should pay heed to their appearance more than boys.

'Modern' masculinities

In line with the understanding that gender is an individually interpreted concept, the participants described a wide range of masculinities. However, there were, once again, common themes to be found, including: temper, practicality, financial independence and physical capability. From the data set, there emerged a picture of male anger or aggression, and of masculinity associated with misbehaviour. Jackie described her father's abusive relationships and how she witnessed him 'bashing women around'; whereas Mary reflected on how her father differed from her conception of stereotypical masculinity, saying:

My dad is a very gentle man with a quiet authority, I suppose, in his role. I've never known him to lose his temper. I've very rarely known him to shout at all, I think.

Such conceptions clearly influenced expectations of behaviour for learning, with teachers reflecting on their ways of managing pupils' behaviour and considering their own childhood experiences. Nick described his younger self as 'Being a lad, rigger bugger'. As a teacher, who became tired of 'just bollocking kids the whole time' in an all-boys school, he found that he preferred teaching the more well-behaved girls' PE group. He saw his own previous behaviour in 'the slightly laddish boys, not concentrating that much'. In doing so he recognises not just his own stereotypical pattern of 'laddish' misbehaviour, but his expectation that those pupils that he currently teaches still conform to these.

Similarly, Mary remembered boys' misbehaviour in nursery school when some of the boys sucked up their paint instead of blowing it to create a bubble picture, recalling:

They'd got paint all over their faces. I remember feeling such disgust. Why couldn't they follow the instructions?

Later in the interview, she discussed her preconceptions as a teacher and how she was aware of her assumptions that boys' behaviour in the classroom is more challenging than girls'. For Mary, the act of identifying her earliest memories of this conception, served to draw her attention to its lingering impact.

The teachers' depictions of masculinities fit within the framework of the changing nature of modern manhood, with conflicts between historic alpha-male archetypal masculine identity and a more complex range of masculinities (Anderson 2012; Connell 2005). The data, for example, suggest that there is an association made between masculinity and showing anger. Connell (2005) suggests that the dominant discourse relates male bodies with certain 'natural' behaviours including aggression, which, she suggests, are actually socially constructed. Anderson and McCormack (2018) argue that there is a contemporary tendency for young men to be comfortable expressing a wider range of emotions. However, this data suggests, for some males, expressing emotion beyond anger may still hold some stigma. And although research such as Anderson and McCormack's (2018) suggests that many young straight men now reject homophobia, are more emotionally intimate with friends and embrace activities previously coded feminine, others, such as Jackson and Sundaram (2020), paint a very different picture of trends amongst young men, suggesting sexism, sexual harassment and violence are commonplace within 'lad' cultures. A picture that this small sample, at least, seems to confirm.

A similarly gendered assumption apparent in the data was that male students were associated with negative, and female students with positive student behaviours, similar to the associations found in Glock and Kleen's (2017) research. It is such presumptions that underpin government policy focussing on the recruitment of male teachers as role-models (Skelton 2009). Skelton and Francis (2009) argue that tapping into 'laddish-ness', by, for example, attempting to engage boys in learning, through selecting adventure books with male lead characters, may actually be reinforcing stereotypes and encouraging precisely the gendered behaviour they seek to avoid. It appears from the data that there persists an attitude amongst some teachers that *boys will be boys* which could be damaging to children of all genders.

Eleven of the participants' spoke, with pride, respect or in neutrality, of their fathers going out to work and earning money – in much the same way that they spoke of their mothers' decisions to stay at home to care for them; there was no evidence of judgement of paternal absence. In contrast to the role of feminine primary carer, a clear connection is seen in the data between masculinity and providing financially for the household, complying with the traditional gendered model for work and family centred around a male earner and female carer (Zuo 2004), despite a supposed decline in such roles in the UK and across Europe due to changes in government policy and societal shifts (Crompton 1999). A masculine association with wealth can subjugate men, pressuring them into such a role under the misapprehension that they have made a choice (Reeser 2010). The rigidity of these roles, created by societal power structures, limit personal liberty.

Sport

The data suggest that sport is strongly associated with masculinity. In 12 out of the 14 interviews, sport was spoken of within the context of masculinities. For example, Nick was 'surrounded by male sporty role models' in his childhood, explaining: 'I went to an all-boys school from the age of 8 where to be successful you would probably perceive that you needed to be sporty and in with the right crowd'. He reflected upon how this awareness, his father's encouragement, and an early aptitude for sport set him on the path to become a PE teacher. He reinforced the stereotype that sport is a masculine endeavour by describing how: 'Boys are easy. Dads kick balls with boys'.

All of the male participants talked about the role that sport had in their upbringing and seven out of the nine female participants also expressed this connection between certain sports and stereotypical masculinity. Maggie spoke about her physical play with her brothers, recalling 'I actually played a lot of sports as a kid'. The word *actually* suggests that this was not to be expected. Other female participants mentioned their interest in sport as unfeminine and, even within these teachers' current schools, there were instances of sport being described as the preserve of the boys. This has significant potential consequences for how physical education is taught, and competitive sport promoted, in schools.

The connotations of linking sport to masculinity inevitably leads to an association between gender and physical capability. Cooky (2009) argues that girls' disinterest in sport is socially constructed; the perception that boys should enjoy and excel in sport and physical activity more generally is borne out by this small data sample. As stereotypical forms of masculinity have been associated with power and physical strength (Reeser 2010), there is a perpetuation of the myth that sport and physical activity are the preserve of males creates an atmosphere in which it appears that some women and girls feel that sport is not for them. This underlying attitude amongst the sample could belie an unconscious bias through which there are differing expectations for male and female pupils at play and in physical education lessons.

Binary conceptions of gender

Throughout the interviews, the representations of gender were largely binary. Despite contemporary discourses which place gender fluidity and the experience of genderqueer children and adults at the centre of the gender debate, these issues were hardly mentioned within the interviews, with much of the discussion of gender still centred around binary positions of men and women, boys and girls. This suggests that, amongst this sample at least, teachers' attitudes to gender may be less progressive than education policy dictates.

In recent years, one important element of debate around gender in the media has been concentrated around trans rights (Koyama 2020; Morgan and Taylor 2019) and, within education, around the experience of gender queer pupils and staff (Ferfolja and Ullman 2020). Despite their central roles in contemporary debates about gender, discussions about gender fluidity and transgender children were almost entirely absent from the dataset. In the most part, this sample's observations were binary in nature. This suggests that the modern media and academic discourse around gender is incongruous with the everyday experience of this particular group of teachers' lives, and careers. The data suggest that 'the average' teacher may still hold a very binary – based understanding of gender, which could unwittingly be harmful to young children confused about their gender identity. The overall depictions of gender presented by the participants in this study potentially perpetuate a rigid and restrictive binary environment.

Conclusions and implications for practice

It is apparent that teachers' perceptions of gender do influence their practice. This sample illustrates the nature of some teachers' understandings of femininities and masculinities and how they are tied to gender stereotypes as portrayed in the media and which are entrenched in societal expectations for traditional roles. The data also suggest that these attitudes may be carried into the modern day classroom. Although there has been a widespread shift in cultural practices in the UK (and other countries) towards an expectation of gender equality, the attitudes and experiences of this group of teachers can be seen to echo more traditional gender stereotypes. These views could influence the implicit messages that the teachers inadvertently pass on to their pupils. Indeed, the teachers recognise some of these for themselves. It is, therefore, pertinent to appreciate the underlying cultural gendered environment which this data suggest remains, and which may be unconsciously perpetuated.

An awareness of someone's gender identity is quite different from understanding how their masculinity or femininity is constructed and though most of us are men in male bodies and women in female bodies, our own understanding of our masculinity and femininity varies at different times and in different situations (Paechter 2006). Consequently, the identification of gender is made via analysis of performed behaviour, forcing us to categorise different behaviours as 'masculine' or 'feminine' at the risk of stereotyping (Francis 2010). It appears that through our own experiences, we learn to adopt behaviours which are associated with the expected performance of masculinity or femininity. Although these are performed in different ways and are interpreted individually, each person seeking to meet the cultural and societal norms which pervade may be unwittingly limited by gender stereotypes. This strongly suggests that teachers may inadvertently pass on to their pupils limiting messages about gender. As the teachers reflected on their own practice, they began to recognise some of the ways in which these messages are conveyed. These portrayals could be potentially harmful in their restrictive nature and play a part in narrowing the expectations for pupils of all genders and this needs to be addressed.

Although there has not been space to fully explore the aspect here, follow up contact with the participants in this research demonstrated the potential of reflection as a tool for bringing about change in attitudes and in practice. All of the participants who responded confirmed that they had given greater consideration to their pedagogic approach following the interview. They all shared how they became more committed to challenging gender stereotypes in their own teaching having reflected upon their gender constructions. A full exploration of the potentiality of reflection as a tool in bringing about change in practice in this area is something to be further explored in a future publication. However, at this point it is important to recognise the nagging persistence of gender stereotypes that may exist in our own understandings, and the possibility of these manifesting in the classroom and impacting upon pupils. Recognising this possibility may be enough to enable some teachers to confront their preconceptions and actively seek to avoid sharing these with pupils. This may be through teachers considering, for example: their use of language; choices made about curriculum coverage; attitudes that they display about sport, management of the learning environment (including 'groupings') and selection of resources. Moving forward, some key aspects for all education practitioners to consider include:

- Become more aware of how their own early experiences of gender might have shaped their attitudes
- Reflect on any lingering gender stereotypes and how these might impact upon their own pedagogical practices
- Consider how language used might influence pupils' understandings of gender
- Avoid segregating pupils by gender
- Audit resources to minimise those which portray gender stereotypes
- Revise the curriculum to actively promote gender equality.

This study has contributed to knowledge about teachers' contemporary understandings of masculinities and femininities and the issues they deem relevant to gender construction. It has revealed some ways in which these gender conceptions affect teachers' expectations for their own and their pupils' behaviour. It is both possible and necessary to challenge the gender stereotypical attitudes which teachers have encountered through their lives and may continue to carry into the classroom, and reflection upon individual experience of, and creation of gender expectations, is one way of achieving this.

Ethical approval

I can confirm that this study received full ethical approval through the College of Arts, Humanities and Education committee at the University of Worcester: CAHE18190013.

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