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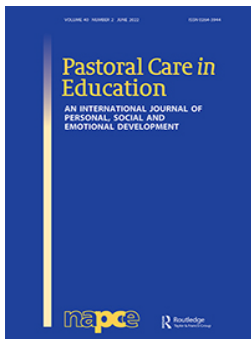
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# Boys will be boys: Young people's perceptions and experiences of gender within education

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## ABSTRACT

Despite many attempts in recent years, gender differences in young people's experiences of education are still very much in existence. In this study we explored how gender impacted young people's experiences of secondary education. We conducted five focus groups with N = 35 young people (N = 11 male) aged 13–14 years from a school in a low socio-economic status (SES), area in England and asked whether there were different expectations in school for boys and girls and the impact that this might have. Using thematic analysis, four key themes were identified that mostly related to boys: gender impacts subject choice, boys are naughty, and boys are strong. Furthermore, young people felt under extreme pressure to conform to gender stereotypes. Teachers were seen as inadvertently promoting gender stereotypes, while peers were often seen as doing this intentionally and harmfully. This indicates that gender can have a strong impact on young people's experiences in secondary school and it is important to work with young people to empower them to change this.

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Gender; education; secondary school; expectations; behaviour; subject choice

## Introduction

Gender is one of the most powerful social groups to which we belong and the one we typically recognise earliest. From as young as two years old, children recognise gender differences in characteristics and roles and these quickly begin to shape children's behaviour (Berenbaum et al., 2008; Bigler & Liben, 1992). This can be reinforced by their parents who may purchase gender typed toys or positively reinforce gender typical behaviour (Wingrave, 2016; Witt, 1997). When children enter school, this new environment offers broader social influences, which may also impact children's views of gender. For example, schools are often organised around gender with gender segregation in sport and roles are delineated by gender (e.g. head boy/head girl). Enhancing the salience of gender has been found to trigger students' gender stereotypes (Bigler, 1995; Hilliard & Liben, 2010).

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According to Bem's gender schema theory (1981, 1983) gender typed behaviour is learned when children observe their environment and learn associations with masculinity and femininity. They use this information to develop a schema, a cognitive framework 'which organises and guides an individual's perception' (Bem, 1981, p. 355) specifically focussed on gender. They adjust their own behaviour to fit with the norms they learn about gender as their self-esteem is linked to enacting these gender typed behaviours. In early life, parents are likely to be the key socialisers (Carli & Bukkato, 2000), through modelling and encouragement of behaviours (McHale et al., 1999) but later, peers and teachers can reinforce the importance of gender (see Jones & Dindia, 2004; Rose & Rudolph, 2006 for reviews). Schools therefore shape gendered behaviour, which in turn can impact developmental experiences, educational experiences and thus life trajectories. It is important to talk to young people to explore their perspectives and lived experiences. It could be argued that we have come a long way in addressing gender equality issues, however, we know that notions of masculinity and femininity are still powerful influences within society, which includes schools. Having a better insight into how young people view and experience gender within education can inform school practice within a gender equality framework. In this study we wanted to give girls and boys the space to reflect on what they saw as the key differences and challenges. Though both boys and girls participated in the research, the negative impacts on boys were discussed in detail and very little was said about the impact on girls. Therefore, in this paper we will also focus more on the impact on boys to reflect our participants' experiences.

From an early age, children tend to prefer to interact with same sex peers (Maccoby, 1998) and this self-imposed segregation may exacerbate gender differences in behaviour, attitudes and roles (Martin & Fabes, 2001). This is not only found in young children but continues through to adolescence when the diverging physical appearances of males and females increase the accessibility of gender-related self-knowledge (Finkenauer et al. 2002). Furthermore, it has been found that adolescents who show gender typical behaviours are more accepted and more popular with their peers and have higher self-worth (e.g. Egan and Perry 2001; Jewell and Brown 2014; Yunger et al. 2004). However, it is not just that those who exhibit gender typical behaviours are rewarded, but those who exhibit gender atypical behaviours are often penalised (Davies, 1989, 1993; Connolly, 2004). For example, both primary and secondary pupils 'police' the gendered behaviour of their peers, and punish failure to conform to traditional gender norms (Lees, 1992). This effect is often stronger for boys violating gender norms than for girls (Langlois & Downs, 1980). For example, Yu et al. (2017) found in their cross-cultural research while there was broad acceptance of girls who enjoyed typically male activities, this same acceptance was not found for boys who enjoyed more typically female activities. These boys often faced physical, verbal or psychological retribution from their peers. Boys'

curricular and life choices may therefore be severely circumscribed by dominant notions of masculinity, and many boys actively avoid association with the femininity or curriculum areas and subjects related to the private, domestic sphere to avoid negative reactions from peers (see for example, Collins et al. 1996; and DETYA, 2000). Smiler (2014) refers to the pressures to conform to notions of masculinity as 'ever-present, relentless, and inescapable' (p. 256).

Within the concept of hegemonic masculinity is the notion that within schools, heterosexual identities are the 'norm'. This results in an 'othering' process with LGBT identities being seen as deviant and unnatural. Butler (1990, 1993) writes about how hetero-normative discourses permeate all aspects of school life. It is evident that children (even as young as 10-12 years) feel huge pressure to conform to these norms, with a strong desire to 'fit in' (Renold, 2013). This leads to a culture within schools which is very difficult to challenge. Research has shown the influence of the peer group in reinforcing hegemonic masculinity and gender stereotypes. One way the peer group can reinforce these gender norms is through bullying and harassment (Phoenix et al., 2003).

Gender has also been linked to academic performance. For example, internationally, boys underperform compared to girls (Voyer & Voyer, 2014). In England, girls outperform boys at GCSE and have done so consistently from 2000 to 2020 (e.g. Statista, 2021). These gender differences in academic attainment have recently provoked a stereotypical depiction in the media of male students as unsuccessful and troublesome and female students as successful and compliant (Latsch & Hannover, 2014). Indeed, both primary school children and adolescents are more likely to view girls as being academically superior to boys (Hartley & Sutton, 2013; Latsch & Hannover, 2014).

Gendered expectations are not restricted to the academic sphere, but extend to general behaviour. Research has suggested that girls are typically perceived as displaying better conduct, and traits and behaviours that are beneficial for learning (Hartley & Sutton, 2013; Latsch & Hannover, 2014). Girls have been found to be more diligent, agreeable and conscientious (i.e. dutiful and self-disciplined) (e.g. Costa et al., 2001; De Fruyt et al., 2008). Boys, on the other hand are more likely to misbehave in class, fail to complete assignments, and are less likely to try to do their best work (Kessels & Steinmayr, 2013). Boys are also more likely than girls to receive a range of disciplinary consequences, both at the lower level, for example, being sent out of class, and at the higher level including suspension, (Lietz & Gregory, 1978; McFadden et al., 1992; Shaw & Braden, 1990; Skiba et al., 1997; Taylor & Foster, 1986). In 2017/18 6,118 boys were permanently excluded from school compared to only 1,787 girls (Department for Education and Skills, 2019).

However, it may not be as simple as boys being naughtier than girls. As previously discussed, this may also be due to how boys' behaviour is perceived by teachers, perhaps due to their own schemas about gender. For example, it

has been found that teachers see boys as more demanding and difficult to teach than girls (Skelton & Francis, 2003). Teachers also often have lower expectations of boys than girls and enlist girls in the battle to 'police, teach, control and civilise boys' (Epstein et al., 1998). Indeed, Smith and Gorard (2002) found that across several European countries, boys felt that they were treated less favourably than girls (Smith & Gorard, 2002, as cited in Myhill & Jones, 2006). This finding is echoed throughout the research literature (Wing, 1999; Francis, 2000). Where teachers link poor behaviour with boys, they have a greater tendency to police male classroom behaviour. Therefore, teachers' schema about boys being naughty can have negative consequences for boys in terms of academic success, but also a sense of self-worth (Riley & Docking, 2004).

Boys are typically seen as being stronger than girls, both in the physical and emotional sense. Typically girls are more emotionally expressive than boys (Briton & Hall, 1995; Brody, 1999; Hess et al., 2000; Kring & Gordon, 1998) expressing more sadness and anxiety while boys express more anger and contempt (Brody and Hall 2008; Jordan et al. 1991; Zahn-Waxler et al. 2011). This may be in part due to expectations (Brody, 1999; Brody & Hall, 2008) and societal gender roles suggesting men are powerful and in control and women are nurturing and maintain relationships (Brody, 1999). Way et al. (2014) refer to a code of conduct that requires boys to be, e.g. emotionally stoic and physically tough; they referred to one boy in their study as saying, 'it might be nice to be a girl, then you wouldn't have to be emotionless'. It has been argued that boys learn this early in life (Hammer et al., 2013). The consequences of this are that boys and men are less likely to seek help, which can exacerbate physical and emotional problems (Hammer et al., 2013). Seeking help represents a violation of these norms. It probably also explains why males aged 15 to 19 are two and a half times more likely to die from suicide than females (Office for National Statistics, 2016).

Gender essentialism suggests that gendered traits are stable, fixed at birth and based on biological factors (Smiler & Gelman, 2008). Many young children view gender differences in this way, and this is widely believed to be due to early emerging cognitive biases (Gelman, 2003). However, as children age and their cognitive abilities develop, gender essentialism reduces (Taylor et al., 2009). This is not to say that older children, adolescents and adults do not hold essentialist views of gender. Eison and Coley (2014) found that many university students showed high levels of essentialism when they needed to complete a task at speed, suggesting that many people may hold essentialist beliefs in adulthood but may not express them due to more explicit reasoning processes. Alternatively, there may be social pressures not to express essentialist beliefs. However, gender essentialism is likely to be linked with a more negative view of those who violate gender norms and a belief that differences in the treatment of boys and girls is justified. In contrast, believing that gender differences are socially constructed is likely to lead to acceptance of those

who do not conform to gender typed behaviour and importantly a belief that any differences in treatment of boys and girls cannot be justified and should be challenged. Therefore, another aim of the study is to explore whether boys and girls believe that any differences between boys and girls can be changed and how this could be done.

As Bem (1981, 1983) suggests, children's understanding of gender is influenced by the schemas they create by observing and learning from their environment. Young people's experiences of gender are therefore also likely to be influenced by environmental variables such as their socio-economic status. For example, growing levels of human and economic development are thought to have led to less traditional attitudes to gender roles (Inglehart, 1997, comparing 43 western and non-western countries). Women who are in the workforce (Zuo & Tang, 2000), who are less dependent on men (Baxter & Kane, 1995) and who are highly educated (Rhodebeck, 1996,) are likely to have more egalitarian views of gender. Children from more economically advantaged family backgrounds also have more egalitarian gender attitudes (e.g. Antill et al., 2003; Kulik, 2002; Marks et al., 2009). The sample in the current study consisted of young people at a school in a low socio-economic status (SES) area. Therefore, it is important to consider our findings through this lens of SES.

In the current study we explored young people's experiences of gender in education from their own perspective. In focus groups, we questioned young people about their perceptions of the different experiences of boys and girls in education using a semi-structured guide. Our research question was: How do young people experience gender in secondary school?

## **Method**

### ***Participants***

Participants were 35 young people aged 13–14 years who were recruited from a secondary school in a low SES area in the West Midlands. Twenty four were female and the participants were given the choice to participate in an all male group (one group of six participants), all female (two groups of seven or eight participants) or mixed (one group of six, two male and four female and a second group of eight, one male and seven females) depending on their preference.

### ***Materials***

Materials were developed and pretested with a group of eight A level psychology students from a different school to ensure that the questions were understandable and relevant. We wanted to ensure that the language we used was

clear and that we would not inadvertently bring up very sensitive topics. The research involved a semi structured focus group where we had broad questions, we wanted to explore with participants but allowed them freedom to explore topics which were relevant to them. Below are the eight main questions.

- (1) ) In what areas of school life are boys and girls treated differently/ expected to behave differently?
- (2) ) What effect do you think these differences might have on boys/girls? How have they affected your behaviour?
- (3) ) Where do these messages come from?
- (4) ) What about when you were younger, were the issues the same or different?
- (5) ) Do you think these issues will be the same or different as you get older, for example, going to college and university or into work?
- (6) ) If you were a Headteacher what would you change to address some of these issues?

### ***Procedure***

Young people were given information about the study face to face. We briefly explained the aims of the research, gave them some example questions, and reminded them that sensitive topics could be discussed in focus groups. They were told that if they were interested in participating in the research they should complete an 'Expression of interest' form giving their name, gender and preference for a single or mixed gender group. If they did not wish to participate then they did not need to complete the form. Those who were interested in participating took an information sheet and opt out letter home for their parents. Parents were also told about the letters via a text from the school.

Once we had received the expression of interest forms and had given parents a week to return the opt out consent form, participants were assigned to one of five groups by teachers. Teachers created groups of students who generally got on well to ensure that participants would feel comfortable sharing their thoughts and student preferences for a mixed or single gender group.

At the beginning of the focus group we reminded participants that participation was optional, and they could choose to stop participating at any time without giving a reason. They were also reminded only to share experiences they were comfortable with the group hearing. We asked participants not to tell people outside of the group what was said and also asked that they did not use pupils' or teachers' names in any stories. They were reminded about anonymity in reports. Participants then completed a consent form and recording commenced.



We began with a task where students were asked to write down stereotypes about boys and girls as an ice breaking task. We then asked each of the questions above and prompted students to give more detail. The focus group lasted around 45 minutes in total. At the end, participants were fully debriefed. Participants were reminded to keep the conversation confidential and also to speak to a teacher or a school counsellor if they had been upset by the discussion.

### ***Analytic Method***

Thematic Analysis was used to analyse the focus group data. This analytical strategy is a very flexible method and takes into account the qualitative richness of the data. The analysis was guided by Braun and Clarke (2006), which firstly involved reading each transcript to become familiar with the data set; then initial coding took place. Coding was inductive and data-driven. These codes were then re-read and refined further so that they captured that unit of meaning. The codes from the data set were then organised to see if any of the codes were related to each other and to see if there were potential themes emerging. This process was conducted independently by the two researchers before coming together to discuss the initial themes emerging. This process identified several themes, and these themes were then reviewed by re-reading the data extracts relating to that individual theme, and the whole data set. This meant that the themes attempted to capture the true representation of the data. When reviewing the codes and themes, some of the themes overlapped with other themes and so were merged, while other themes were slightly modified to capture the data extracts better. The themes were 'semantic' as opposed to 'latent' in that the codes and subsequent themes captured the surface level, semantic meaning in the data. The four main themes we discuss in more detail below are, gender and subject choice, boys are naughty, boys are strong and pressure to conform to stereotypes.

## **Analysis**

### ***Gender and Subject choice***

It is interesting to note that while current academic literature has focussed on understanding why boys underperform in school, this was not a theme in any of our focus groups. Instead both boys and girls focussed on the impact of gender on subject choice and agreed that this was particularly problematic for boys as they were more likely to experience negativity and bullying from peers if they deviated from typically 'male' subjects. This led boys to refer more to peers when selecting subjects while girls referred more to their own interests.

This suggests that, in line with Bem (1981), our participants had very clear schemas about what was appropriate in terms of subject choice, particularly for boys.

Boys were unlikely to take traditionally 'female' subjects, e.g. 'I don't think even one male chose child development, it was all females' (G5, mixed, male) 'Boys pick sport BTEC and everything and most girls don't, sports is for boys, girls would pick dance and everything' (G4, mixed, male) and 'It's like some subjects are only seen as for some people' (G5, mixed, female). Participants agreed that boys were more likely to be judged negatively for choosing 'female' subjects while the effects would be less pronounced for girls choosing 'male' subjects. For example, '(Boys are) most likely to get bullied. But if it was a girl taking sport BTEC then it would be alright, wouldn't say nothing. But if a boy took dance, they would be called gay and everything.' (Group 5, mixed, male), 'There is a few girls who would take sport BTEC in our year, but they have had no problems with that' (G3, all male). This finding is in line with literature suggesting that while it is deemed more acceptable for girls to take a gender atypical subject, there is greater pressure on boys to conform (Eden, 2017).

The fact that boys were more likely to be perceived negatively for choosing 'female' subjects meant that boys commonly talked about how peers had impacted their subject choice. This theme was picked up on by both boys and girls, for example: 'because I don't want to get picked on or stereotyped by my mates' (G3, all male) and 'They get judged if they pick child development because normally the mum looks after the baby, so if ... The lad picked child development, it wouldn't be weird, but [he would be judged by] his friends and other boys' (G1, all female). This judgment appears to lead to bullying behaviour towards boys who broke these gender norms. For example 'there was this lad who took dance and he was called gay in the street and that' (G4, mixed, male) and 'I actually really wanted to pick dance and I regret not picking it but, I feel as if I'd get bullied if I did pick it and I would ... Change in a way, from it ... I don't want to become like, depressed or anything so I just played it safe and picked another option.' (G3, all male). In contrast, girls were more likely to choose subjects because of interest and with less reference to others, e.g. 'Because I was interested in them' (G1, all female) and 'I don't think I cared, just wanted to do what I wanted to do' (G5, mixed, female). Thus, it was not simply a case that over time, students' life goals and interests had changed in line with peer influence (e.g. Hill et al., 2016), but instead that young people felt unable to choose subjects they were interested in, based on the perceived negative response of peers.

When participants were asked what could be done to encourage students to choose gender atypical subjects, they had several suggestions. Many suggested they needed extra exposure to different subjects, 'Like for every single option, take us somewhere ... Like, go somewhere on a trip somewhere, ... say [a] University, and see how they do psychology and I think, if they took them on

trips and showed where these options can take you, you can actually like, see if you want to pick it or not' (G3, all male). 'They should let you like have a couple of lessons in like the subjects that you wouldn't normally think of doing' (G1, all female) and as a way of promoting equality 'They should make it that boys and girls are both equal, girls don't get more chance than boys and boys are more encouraged to do things that girls would usually do and girls are encouraged to do things boys would do' (G2, all female).

It was also suggested that around the time that students choose their options, teachers could focus on the positive outcomes of taking subjects, both in the real world 'Show how if we didn't pick them options what . . . Like if we didn't pick child development, what could go wrong if we had a baby that had something and we couldn't treat it correctly. If they persuaded us that . . . ' (G3, all male) and in terms of future study 'you could show what jobs you could get with that qualification,' (G3, all male). The participants thought that the media could also run campaigns to promote cross gender subject choice, 'Oh yeah, like it can go "This Boy Can" and then looking after a baby and everything? . . . Yeah I think that would encourage me more' (G3, all male). These suggestions appear to be focussed on changing perceptions of what boys and girls 'should' take as subjects and careers and therefore fit well within a schema theory approach focussed on creating broader roles or less clear boundaries between schemas for boys and girls.

### ***Boys are naughty***

This theme explains how boys are perceived as naughty, which has implications in terms of teacher expectations and differential treatment of boys and girls in the school setting. The boys talked about how this makes them feel, as well as the effect this can have on their behaviour and that of the girls.

Firstly, there was a great deal of discussion about the stereotype of boys being naughty. This theme is clearly linked to previous research (Costa et al., 2001; De Fruyt et al., 2008) with quotes including: 'Like, boys act . . . Like, they're known as violent more than girls' (G3, all male). Whereas girls are seen as mature and sensible, 'Like, most people see girls as quite shy and innocent' (G1, all female). In some cases, the pupils themselves endorsed these stereotypes, 'Boys are naughtier than girls' (G1, all female), 'Boys are loud' (G5, mixed, female), and 'I'd say girls are more mature than boys' (G3, all male).

There was recognition that this impacts the ways that boys and girls are treated. For example, it can affect adults' expectations, 'If people see teenage boys, they are going to think we're gonna be causing trouble, and when they see girls, probably not' (G3, all male) and 'The teachers expect us to be, like, more immature than girls, and mess around' (G3, all male). There was discussion about an incident where a shoe was stolen. The teacher warned the class that whoever was found to have the shoe would get detention. The shoe was found in a girl's bag and she had taken the shoe, but the teacher went back on her

threatened punishment, saying, 'I wouldn't expect it off you anyway'. There was the feeling that if it was a boy, the situation would have been handled differently (G1, all female).

The perceived result is that teachers monitor boys more closely which has implications for their freedom in school, for example 'He would have let [the girl] have a choice in where to sit, but for me, because he thinks I am naughty and everything ... So, he sat me right next to him' (G4, mixed, male), 'The dinner lady stands at the door, and she's always there, and every girl that comes to the [door] she'll let in. If it's a boy, she'll think twice and say, "go away"' (G3, all male).

These expectations also affect how teachers behave, with the view that boys are more often blamed for incidents which appear ambiguous, '[Boys] normally get the blame for like, if someone was talking in class, they would normally get the blame' (G1, all female), and, 'Today in English, someone made a noise on the computer ... but then the teacher, like, automatically assumed that it was the boy that made the noise' (G1, all female). It also affects punishments, even if girls are to blame, e.g. 'If a girl does something, they get let off. But if a boy does it, he'll get yellow carded straight away and sent out of class' (G2, all female), 'If you did one bad thing in [the canteen], like, didn't pick up some litter, you dropped some litter, [the dinner lady] will then go, "boys get out", but if it's a girl, she'll just go, "pick it up and put in in the bin"' (G3, all male), and 'But, if it's a girl, then it's all, "Oh, that's alright"' (G4, mixed, male). This finding supports previous research suggesting that boys often feel they are treated less favourably than girls (Smith & Gorard, 2002).

In terms of the consequences of this, the boys talked about how this makes them feel, e.g. 'angry' (G3, all male) and 'annoyed' (G4, mixed, male). It can also impact their behaviour with some boys admitting that they end up living up to the stereotype, 'You just feel like you want to be bad ... you just give up and you be bad again, and you start being bad out of nowhere' (G3, all male), and 'Like, get angry, and start messing around' (G4, mixed, male). Some girls recognised this too, 'The boys might rebel' (G5, mixed, female). The girls too, admitted that it does have an effect on them, 'That we can do anything really' (G1, all female), 'We take advantage of not being chucked out of class as much', 'But the girls can pretty much do what they want and the teachers let em' (G2, all female).

According to gender schema theory, young people create schemas from observing others. The behaviour of teachers, for example, monitoring and blaming boys more than girls, appears to illustrate their own schema that boys are naughty. This may have impacted the young people's schemas, to believe this too. However, young people did state that this belief was not fair and recognised that teacher behaviours often led to a self-fulfilling prophecy in that boys became angry and then did act in line with the norm of being naughty, rather than actually being naughtier than girls.

## **Boys are strong**

A key theme was that boys are stronger than girls. This difference was seen both physically, with boys being viewed as better able to assist in physical tasks and play sports, but also emotionally with boys being less able to express emotions.

There was a strong feeling that boys should be, 'masculine', 'strong and confident', and 'able to take emotional and physical pain' (G5, mixed, female), as well as being 'brave' (G4, mixed, male). Whereas girls are, 'Maybe a little vulnerable and fragile' (G5, mixed, male). The implications of this are that boys, rather than girls get asked to help with more physical activities like moving tables, 'They'll always say, like, 'have you got a strong boy that I can borrow''. The boys agreed with this, 'You being expected to lift the heavy stuff and the girl will lift all the light' (G3, all male). Girls seemed to resent this, 'Like, we're not all weak, we can still do what they can do!' (G1, all female). This perception also affects how teachers interact with boys and girls in sports, 'At the minute we're doing cricket and if it's a boy that's bowling, she tells them go like easier on us, so we have a better chance of hitting the ball. So we have to get an easier, we basically get treated like babies, we have to have it easy and the boys have it normal' (G2, all female).

In terms of emotional strength, there was discussion about the impact of boys not being able to show their emotions, 'So, if a guy's expected from when he was younger to not cry and be, like, emotional, then . . . they might be like repressed and stuff like that, and that can hurt them' (G5, mixed, female). In the all male G3, there was a lengthy discussion about this point. One example was a girl they all knew whose pet had died 'she as really upset and everything, and you had to, like, comfort her and everything. But, if it was a boy, a girl wouldn't actually care, she'd just get on with her life'. Related to this, there was also the view that boys should mix with other boys and simply because a boy has many friends who are girls, this can be enough for the boy to be perceived as gay, as this discussion illustrates, 'But, if boys tend to hang around with mostly girls, you think they're a bit . . . gay' (G3, all male), and later, 'But, if you're a boy, if your friend goes over to loads of girls, you just think, ooh, something's wrong with him'. This supports a wealth of research finding that boys are under huge pressure to not express their emotions for fear of being seen as 'girls' or 'gay' (Way, 2011)

Again, the quotes in this section focus on how teachers' stereotypes, in this instance, of boys being stronger and more competent in sports could be passed on to students. However, students may not agree with these beliefs and may find them frustrating and limiting. This section also shows that participants recognised that negative beliefs about emotional expression may have long term negative consequences for boys.

### ***Pressure to conform to stereotypes***

A strong theme which ran through the other themes was the feeling of being judged and not being able to be true to themselves due to pressure to conform to stereotypes, e.g. 'Like I can't be myself, I have to change myself for other people' (G1, all female). Often this was in the context of gender policing to ensure that boys and girls adhere to the expectations around gender norms.

Students perceived that generally when teachers responded to them in gender-typed ways, this was unintentional 'I don't think she meant to intentionally offend anyone' (G5, mixed, female) and 'It's not a sexist thing' (G4 mixed, male) and 'I think people just get like, used to being in environments where stereotypes are usually used and because like, it can be used as stereotypes in a good way and a bad way, you just like, skim over them, they get used because it's just custom to do, isn't it?' (G5, mixed, female). This meant that when they discussed possible solutions to avoid gender typed behaviour in teachers, they generally focussed on increasing awareness of using stereotypes e.g. 'If you wanted someone you wouldn't say, "have you got a strong boy?", you'd ask for one student to carry a box, and the student would volunteer instead of like, the boy's name' (G1, all female) or in case of bad behaviour 'Get, like, the whole side of the story' (G1, all female).

In contrast, comments about peer gender-typing revealed that this was often intentional and hurtful as can be seen in the above themes. This was seen to become more prevalent in secondary school compared to primary school e.g. 'In primary school you just did what you wanted really, and you wouldn't get judged for it' (G1, all female) and 'You can be a girl that hangs out with a group of boys or a boy that hangs out with a group of girls and no one would care' (G5, mixed, female). However, participants felt that as people moved into secondary school, differential peer treatment based on gender became more prevalent. Example comments included 'there's more judgemental people in high school' (G1, all female) and 'You change, in high school, you're more bothered about like, what people think of you ...' (G1, all female) and 'You can't really be yourself' (G1, all female). This suggests that increases in differential treatment come partly from others who are more judgemental, but also from the pupils themselves who are more concerned with fitting in.

They also agreed that gender became less of an issue at college and into adulthood, showing support for existing literature (e.g. Way et al., 2014). This appears to be again partly because others are seen as being less judgemental as they become older and mature 'People are mature when they are older, so it doesn't matter as much. They won't be like really childish like "Oh you're gay" because you have taken dance or something. They will understand because they are more open and mature' (G4, mixed, male), and 'My cousin like, as soon as she got to college she just stopped wearing makeup and everything because no one cared what you looked like anymore, it was great' (G5, mixed, female).

However, it is also seen as being because the pupils themselves would care less about others' opinions 'I think in college, people have become mature enough to not care. In secondary school, people think that they can judge other people but then once you get to college, it's just . . . Your education is your main focus, no one cares anymore' (G5, mixed, female) and 'I don't think adults really tend to think about it' (G5, mixed, female).

Gender schema theory (Bem, 1981) suggests that once people develop a schema, they use this to guide their own gendered behaviour, experiencing high self-esteem when they act in line with their schema. This may explain why participants felt a pressure to act in line with gender typed behaviour themselves and why they responded negatively to those who broke from traditional gender roles. Young people recognised that the policing of gendered behaviour was harmful, whether it was seemingly unintentional like that from teachers, or intentional from peers. They also recognised that the attitudes to gender reflected the context they were in and were not constant across education from primary and into college. Even though they recognised that these strong norms around gendered behaviour were not stable over time and could be changed, their suggestions for how to change them indicated that they did not feel empowered to change this in their peer group. Instead they suggested that teachers could change their behaviours, the media could run campaigns, but none mentioned that they as a peer group could make changes themselves, for example, standing up for others when they saw people being bullied for breaking gender norms.

## General Discussion

The findings suggest that boys and girls in secondary school have different opportunities and experiences. Interestingly, our participants talked more about the negative gendered expectations and influences on boys than girls, and this did not differ depending on the gender composition of the group. Although it was not our intention to explore mainly boys' experiences, this was what participants chose to discuss. Similarly, the themes which were identified from their discussions were not necessarily what would have been expected based on current academic research. For example, there was very little discussion about differences in academic performance between boys and girls. Instead, there was evidence that peers and teachers reinforced gender stereotypes of boys in terms of choosing 'male' subjects, their behaviour (e.g. being naughty) and being physically and emotionally strong. There also appeared to be much more 'gender policing' of boys than girls. Across all the groups, there was a sense of the great pressures young people are under to fit in rather than to authentically express themselves. This pressure came unintentionally from teachers and intentionally from peers.

### ***Limitations and Future Research***

It is interesting to note that more than twice the number of girls participated in the research than boys. Although more girls participated, the participants clearly focussed more on the negative impacts of gender stereotypes on boys than girls. We do not know why this gender difference in participation was observed. It could reflect girls being more comfortable in discussing gender than boys due to the potentially negative impacts boys may experience if they break gender stereotypes (Yu et al., 2017); these negative impacts may make boys reluctant to engage in discussions about gender. Furthermore, we would expect the focus group participants to draw on their own experiences, i.e. those that relate to their own gender identity, so we could have expected more discussion about the impact on girls. However, perhaps when the topic resonates with them and it is sensitive, there may be a tendency to focus on experiences they have observed that relate to a group they do not identify with. These may be easier and less sensitive to discuss.

Furthermore, we asked questions about boys and girls experiences in education, but future research should take a more nuanced view of gender and also explore perceptions of the experiences of young people with other genders (e. g. non-binary) in education.

Additionally, participants were given the opportunity to choose whether they preferred to participate in a same or mixed gender group or to state they did not mind. We found that most participants did not mind, but some did indicate a preference for single sex groups. Halpern et al. (2011) argue that single-sex education increases gender stereotyping and legitimizes institutional sexism. We did not find clear differences between the single and mixed sex groups in our research, but future researchers should carefully consider the allocation of participants to groups in research on gender to ensure they feel comfortable to discuss their views and to ascertain if this impacts findings.

The findings of our research are based on focus groups in one school in the Midlands. The school has a large proportion of students receiving free school meals. Previous research suggests that those from lower SES groups are less likely to have egalitarian views of gender roles (Antill et al., 2003; Kulik, 2002; Marks et al., 2009). The area has also been traditionally associated with coal mining, steelworks and pottery and this traditional job focus may have led students to experience gender more negatively in their school than may be experienced in larger cities. In addition, in our study we focussed solely on experiences of gender, but of course characteristics such as SES, disability and ethnicity may intersect with gender. For example, stereotypes of men and women are more similar to stereotypes of White men and White women than to gender stereotypes of other racial groups (Ghavami & Peplau, 2013). Black people are seen as more masculine and



Asian people as more feminine than White people (Galinsky et al., 2013). Therefore, future research could explore how gender intersects with other characteristics in order to fully understand students' lived experiences.

A cross national survey could also be conducted to better understand how young people experience gender in education. We would argue that this should be conducted with both boys and girls and explore how gender intersects with other variables such as ethnicity, disability and SES to create a more nuanced understanding. Furthermore, while some content could be prescribed, young people should be given the opportunity to discuss the issues they see as being important rather than focussing solely on what the researchers view as important. As with our current study, research priorities may not match the priorities of young people.

### **Implications**

Young people offered many good suggestions for how to address the issue of gendered expectations around subject choice, including greater exposure to the different subjects. They suggested that the subjects need to be presented as gender neutral and with insights into the benefits, not just in terms of careers, but also life experiences, e.g. parenting. This could be done very positively within a wider media campaign, similar to 'This Girl Can', and using positive male role models within gender atypical careers.

The findings also indicate that there is a need for awareness raising and training for all school staff to address some of the stereotypes as 'boys as strong' and 'boys as naughty' perhaps within wider unconscious bias training. Indeed, students tended to see teachers as being thoughtless rather than malicious in their gendered responses. Thus, many teachers may be unaware of the implicit biases they hold and of the potential impact of these. Approaches should be underpinned by comprehensive school equality policies.

Our findings fit well with Bem's (1981, 1983) gender schema theory in that young people knew what was expected from different genders in terms of behaviours and interests, and they used this to guide their own behaviour and police the behaviour of others. However, they did not fully acknowledge the role that they themselves could play in changing schema, for example, by reducing their own and peers' 'policing' and negative response to gender atypical behaviours. Smiler (2014) states that much more research is needed in this area to identify how to support young people to 'resist' stereotypes. Thus, future research could use an action research paradigm to work with young people to learn more about how they think gender roles and stereotypes could be challenged and how they personally could affect this change. It is thus vital to empower young people to understand that while teachers and the media have the power to change stereotypes and behaviours, so to do they.

## Conclusion

Our analysis suggests that the key differences in the classroom between boys and girls at secondary school were to do with subject choice, behaviour, and physical and emotional strength. In addition, differences between boys and girls were seen to have a much more negative impact on boys, for example, in terms of bullying and disengagement from their studies. Teachers were seen as treating boys and girls differently, but this was discussed as being largely unintentional. However, the peer group strongly policed gendered behaviour. Young people felt under immense pressure in secondary school to conform to gender stereotypes. This suggests that future research could work with young people to explore these issues further and develop interventions at the peer group level in order to help us to create more positive experiences in the classroom for both boys and girls.

## Disclosure statement

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

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