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Dialogic identities of male primary teachers in the UK: agency to nuance responses to gender stereotypes

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the production and performance of male primary early career teachers' (ECTs) dialogic identities within the feminized world of the primary school. Combining a 'Figured Worlds' lens with 'gender heteroglossia' supports a discourse analysis of five male primary teachers' narratives of becoming and being a teacher in the UK. Applying these theoretical constructs to data gathered from semi-structured interviews over three years helps to uncover the meaning that male ECTs construct about themselves and others as they navigate new and difficult contexts. Findings reveal that through the manipulation of cultural resources, including dominant gender discourses, there are opportunities within personal agency for these men to begin to create a more nuanced response to stereotypical gender identities and performances.

Introduction

Present-day social and cultural ideals about gender identities are increasing opportunities for more nuanced expressions of masculinity, with a rejection of fixed gender roles and possibilities of new 'caring, inclusive, or emotional masculinities' (Hookway and Cruickshank 2024, 230). However, there is little evidence that an increased acceptance of alternative, 'softer' models of masculinity means a change in attitudes and experiences for those men who work in feminized professions, such as primary teaching.

Although alternative models of masculinity may be more widely accepted, these are not having a discernible impact on current teacher workforce statistics. Within England, the gender constitution of the teacher workforce has been stable over time and predominantly female in all school phases (76% in 2022/23; DfE 2023). Male teachers continue to be less likely to work in nurseries and primary schools (14%) although they are disproportionally represented in leadership roles as headteachers, deputy headteachers and assistant headteachers (DfE 2023). Fullard (2023) notes in his gender analysis of teacher workforce data, that with the relative decline in teachers' pay, almost 3 in 10 teachers

would be financially better off in another profession. This, he argues, has a direct impact on the recruitment and retention of male teachers, citing men's occupational choice as generally more sensitive to wage differentials than women. This situation is not unique to the UK but is also reflected in other Western countries such as Australia, the United States and New Zealand (Burns, Fogelgarn, and Billett 2024; Cruickshank 2019; Heubeck 2021).

The purpose of this paper is to understand the complexities of being and becoming a male primary teacher in the UK, delving beneath the statistics, and exploring the world of the primary school from the viewpoint of the men who teach there. As gendered assumptions are argued to drive governmental teacher recruitment and retention policies (Ankers de Salis et al. 2019; Cousins 2020), explicitly targeting men within recruitment drives, it is important to understand how male teachers are addressed by and respond to the dominant gender discourses in their working world. These focus on gender-traditional behaviour of men and women, and consequently fix gender identities within binarised choices of either 'doing masculinity' or 'doing femininity' (Francis 2008, 213).

Recent research in the field draws on narrative frameworks that tell the stories of male teachers to understand male teacher identities (e.g. Eldred, Gough, and Glazzard 2022; Moosa and Bhana 2020). However, I argue this discursive framing potentially classifies all these men as one homogenous group, separate, and in contrast to female teachers, and with similar responses to discourse. It obscures individual differences in how people respond to the social and cultural world and fails to recognize how lines between dominant gender discourses may be blurred within the local context, limiting our understanding of how gender discourses play out daily for male primary teachers.

I frame the narratives of male ECTs within Francis's (2012) conceptualization of gender heteroglossia and Holland et al.'s (1998) theory of 'Figured Worlds', exploring how powerful gender discourses that operate within the figured world of primary school shape male primary teachers' identity production and performances. Through this lens, I examine how, over time, the responses of male primary teachers to their day-to-day experiences may provide opportunities for resistance and the reimagining of self.

Literature review: what is it like being a male primary teacher?

Common-sense assumptions

Gender identity research has drawn on Connell's work around men and masculinity (1987, 2002) including the concept of 'gender regimes', where social, historical, and cultural constructions of gender are reflected in school organization and practices, including teachers' work. These reflect the dualistic notion of masculine and feminine, defining roles and activities of teachers that adhere to 'common sense' essentialist ideas of masculinity and femininity, directing men into roles associated with leadership, discipline, technology, or sports, whether they like it or not.

Research recognizes that it is important to have male primary teachers within the workforce as they bring different qualities to the classroom (Ankers de Salis et al. 2019), can provide children with a broader understanding of masculinities and femininities (Moosa and Bhana 2020), and offers opportunities to form relations with teachers who children perceive as being like them (McGrath et al. 2020). The literature directs focus to male

primary teachers' identities, claiming dominant discourses pressurize men to display typical masculine behaviour within a feminized environment, such as self-discipline, logic, and competitiveness (Eldred, Gough, and Glazzard 2022; Warin 2017). They are disciplinarians; good at sports; and have a great sense of humour (Jones 2007; Palmer et al. 2020). The discourse positions these men as 'highflyers' – legitimizing their career choice by swift promotion into management; role models for problematic boys, or vulnerable – struggling with negative discourse that places them under scrutiny. Jones (2007) argues that there is no need for male primary teachers to question or reject identities that reify hegemonic masculinity or high status positioning they afford, as they are a valued and powerful 'prized commodity' (Jones 2007, 180) within the primary school. Ankers de Salis et al. (2019) and Moosa and Bhana (2020) both suggest that adherence to these stereotypes may cause barriers within the teacher workforce, creating the perception that female teachers are 'less good' at discipline and less capable as a leader. Conversely, male teachers may be overburdened with dealing with difficult discipline issues or pressured into leadership roles (Burns, Fogelgarn, and Billett 2024); problematic for those males who struggle to conform to these hegemonic ideals, juggling their 'genuine' and 'authentic' self with the prospects of career progression (Brownhill 2014).

Pressure to conform

It is acknowledged that male primary teachers may align to hegemonic masculine identities for personal advantage and associated gender privileges. Conversely, there is evidence that the pressure to adhere to binarised expectations of what it means to be a male primary teacher can lead to struggles and difficulties (Brownhill 2014) with some men feeling socially isolated (Cruickshank 2019; Warwick, Warwick, and Hopper 2012). Crisp and King (2016) in their exploration of primary teacher identities and the cultural beliefs that shape these understandings, note that when men express their intentions to work with children they become 'axiomatically paedophilic' (52). They suggest that by simply voicing their wish to teach children automatically throws a shadow on the ability of a man to meet hegemonic ideals, an illustration of Connell's (2005) marginalized and subordinate masculinities at play. Martino (2008) claims that to escape suspicion and distance themselves from this 'type' of masculinity, male primary teachers partake in hegemonic masculinized performances, presenting themselves as 'real men' and/or father figures carrying out 'men's work'.

Relatedly, Jones (2007, 191) found that male primary teachers enact personal agency as 'gender chameleons' to create a 'paradoxical' identity, what Jones terms a 'Millennium Man', constructed by partial discourses of hegemonic masculinity combined with 'progressive' discourses that construct men as sensitive and caring. Similarly, Warin (2017, 9) argues that men working in a nursery setting (0-4 years) see themselves as 'both fatherly and motherly', having multiple roles, some of the time. She likens men's openness and interchangeability of gender roles to a 'gender flexible' approach. Cousins (2020, 46) findings concur, suggesting male primary teachers in England strive for a 'genderless approach', albeit difficult to obtain. Hedlin et al.'s (2019) interview study of men's positioning within early childhood education suggest that they have only three fixed responses to being positioned as a 'fun guy' in their work settings: either take up the position, take up the position reluctantly or reject the position. The literature brings me to

conclude that between the potential overlap of advantage and survival, male primary teachers lack agency to nuance their identity as they are restricted in their responses to these contradictory gendered discourses. The conceptual framework I adopt within my research illuminates further possibilities for agency, not seen in current research.

Conceptual framework

Agency and identity

Both Francis's (2012) work around gender monoglossia and heteroglossia and Holland et al.'s (1998) dialogic theory bring focus to identity and agency and notably, the positioning of individuals within local contexts, such as a primary classroom. Both recognize that identities are not just adopted discursively; to be made visible, they need to be performed and recognized by others operating within the sociocultural world through activity or practice. Central to both their work is Bakhtin's concept of dialogism (1981, 1986) that recognizes the importance of how individuals explain who they are by drawing on the words of others, repurposing these words to author the self through the orchestration of multiple 'voices' – overheard words, dialects, and languages of others. Both Francis (2012) and Holland et al. (1998) emphasize that identity is not unitary but multiple in nature. Hence, identities are never finalized, they are always in the process of becoming, originating from the sociocultural or 'figured worlds' that we experience over the course of our lives. Bakhtin's (1981) 'heteroglossia' reflects this process of becoming, where various identities are recognized and performed through the individual's continuous response to multiple past, present, and future 'voices'. Opportunities for agency occur within the internal dialogue both with imaginary others and in direct social relations through dialogue with real others. This self-authoring process is open-ended as each utterance becomes a new way to make meaning through improvising within the languages of 'heteroglossia' – 'specific world views' (Bakhtin 1981, 291). Agency occurs through the activity of choosing to 'answer' and 'address' others in a particular way. People have the capacity to resist the positions that are available, albeit with some limitations, and choose alternative positions, affording alternate identities.

Gender heteroglossia

Francis (2008; 2012) attempts to address the challenge of capturing the diversity of gender identities within a dialogic framework, moving beyond a purely discursive/narrative analysis of gender identities. She offers a new perspective in the reading of gender; that the conception of gender and its performance is both 'monoglossic' where language and other cultural artefacts are static and distinct, and 'heteroglossic', where multiple meanings exist. Importantly for Francis, those gender performances that on the surface appear binarised as masculine or feminine, formed within 'the monoglossic gender matrix' (2012, 6), are instead, reconstructed and reproduced as they take place within a landscape of heteroglossia, where multiple identities are defined and performed. Francis (2012) notes that gender heteroglossia, as it occurs in all gender productions, is a constant part of everyday life and facilitates understanding of all performances of gender.

She argues that a Bakhtinian analysis of gender acknowledges both the dominant corporal productions of gender and the part heteroglossia plays within these productions. This enables research to explore those subjectivities that do not 'fit' the monoglossic account perpetuated by socially dominant groups, such as male primary teachers who do not adhere to hegemonic masculine performances.

Figured worlds

Holland et al. (1998) effectively combine ideas of self and identity with understandings of agency and power. They frame identity construction as a dialogic process, where people tell themselves and others who they are through appropriation of cultural and social resources available to them within diverse sociocultural contexts, various figured worlds. Recognizing our identities when we are amongst different people and in different contexts occurs through the engagement with various cultural tools and artefacts, including the words of others, and through our on-going social activity.

Figured worlds tell us more about the on-the-ground experiences that arise within different sociocultural worlds, exploring the collective understanding of familiar generic figures and their acts, situated within particular social structures. Their focus encompasses both culture and subject positioning simultaneously as they assert that:

> Identities form in these figured worlds through the day-to-day activities undertaken in their name. Neophytes are recruited into and gain perspective on such practices and come to identify themselves as actors of more or less influence, more or less privilege, and more or less power in these worlds. (Holland et al. 1998, 60)

These worlds are socially organized, developed through interactions that position, and reposition the self and others. This could be how people teach, how they behave in staffrooms, the stories they tell. Hence, a primary school is a figured world, with collectively recognized characters, performances, and cultural resources that all carry meaning to those who work there. Entering the figured world of primary school as neophytes, as ECTs, has the power to profoundly shape how male teachers think, act, and develop their identities.

My conceptual framework provides the lens to look beyond the monoglossic conditions that have the potential to mask heteroglossia. I can focus on identity construction and performances of my participants located between the 'interstices' of grand structures – gender in this case – and their local environment. Operationalizing these theoretical positions highlights an individual's capacity for change, in terms of their developing sense of who they are as male primary ECTs, their identity positioning in relation to others and the environment they are working in, and how they may be able to orchestrate a different response to the gendered assumptions that the literature tells us are still at play within the primary classroom.

Research context and design

In this paper, I explore the figured worlds of my participants, five ECT male teachers between the ages of 23 and 35: training and then teaching in primary schools in the North of England. Most of the participants self-selected. It is noticeable that the majority

were white British, with most choosing not to go into teaching straight from school or college. It may be that responding positively to the call for participants; they felt they had more experience to share with their varied initial career choices. There was a distinct lack of diversity in terms of race and ethnicity amongst the participants. However, it may be that they positioned themselves as the 'right kind' of primary teacher – white, male, and heterosexual – what Skelton (2007, 684) calls a 'tightly proscribed identity found in Government, media and public discourse', ensuring the continued acceptance and perseverance of male primary teachers who reinforce heteronormative identities and performances within the workforce (Cruickshank 2019).

Although the participants were similar in terms of race, ethnicity, and social class, through employing my conceptual framework to guide my interpretive analysis of the data, I could highlight the multiple, diverse dimensions to their dialogic identities. Identities are made visible through performance and recognition by others operating within the sociocultural world and as Black et al. (2010) notes, our 'identity-in-practice' is made visible in dialogic spaces like an interview, as within these spaces, participants can self-author, orchestrating the words of others to define who they are and who they are not.

Using a multi-case design with a small sample size brings an opportunity to gather 'intimate knowledge' of everyday human development through a closeness to real-life events that may be missing from research using alternative methodologies (Flyvberg 2006, 6). Interviewing my participants every year over three years created strong and trusting relationships between us and increased my awareness of how they were authoring themselves and their working world. Using semi-structured interviews helped me to ask questions that narrated my participants' reality, exploring their experiences in the figured world of primary school. The second and third rounds of interviews began with an opportunity for participants to revisit their previous responses, providing, in Bakhtinian terms, a discursive space to address and answer multiple voices, including their past selves. This process interrupted potential researcher – participant power dynamics. It allowed them to become collaborators in the research process and co-constructors in the production of knowledge.

I am aware that it might seem surprising that I am a female researcher carrying out research about men. O'Keefe (2016) notes the tension that exists between the number of male researchers and the number of female teachers, suggesting that this imbalance adds to the unequal power relations in research production. However, my positioning as a female researcher felt entirely different from my position as a female ex-primary teacher. I was engaged in social activity within a figured world where I had very little status as a female early-career researcher, conducting social relations with male teachers who were self-authoring as more powerful and privileged than their teaching status may suggest. I argue that operationalizing my conceptual framework for data analysis not only brought focus to how these male primary teachers were orchestrating the 'voices' from their past, present, and future, but also acknowledged the interpretation of responses in relation to my own identities and positioning: as a teacher educator, a researcher, and a woman.

Ethics

Ethical approval was organized via the university which sponsored the research. As a tutor to some of the participants, I ensured boundaries were clear between professional and

researcher roles via ethical principles that required the asking for volunteer participation, signed consent, right to withdraw, safeguarding the anonymity of individuals, the university, and schools using pseudonyms throughout. Conversely, the tutor role provided the benefit of having an established relationship with participants – a crucial way to build trust in ethics (Barbour & Schostak 2011). It meant my own expertise brought insight of the context of the research to ensure a more plausible interpretation of responses.

Findings

Three key themes emerged from the data. First, all the participants, at one time or another described some discomfort and vulnerability describing being a primary teacher, even as more experienced teachers. Second, they juxtaposed their reports of uneasiness with stories that draw on recognizable hegemonic masculine discourses – they are a rarity in the figured world of primary school and different to women teachers – positioning them with more power and status as men. Finally, their views of themselves and their position as a male primary teacher became more nuanced with time and experience as they exercise some agency to improvise responses to the constraints of their context, choosing to self-author differently.

In the first two sections, I focus on the contrasting narratives of the participants when they first started teaching, exploring the first – and second-year data. The majority were final year student teachers, although Mark and Leo were ECTs coming to the end of their first year of employment. These sections examine how they are positioned in contrasting low status and powerful privileged positions that are available for them as beginning teachers and as men in the figured world of primary school, and how, within the discursive interview space, they choose to author and (re)position themselves.

Discomfort and difficulties

Being socially isolated

All the participants tell stories of isolation and feeling uncomfortable in schools because they are men, supporting Cruikshank's (2019) findings exploring male primary teachers' social isolation within a feminized profession. My participants describe finding it 'difficult to integrate into the school' and conversations where they 'don't feel [they] can get involved'. Reflecting on his teacher training, Nick, a mature student, describes the feeling of 'being on [his] own', and how he was 'left to it' in the primary school. His positioning as a neophyte is explicit in his description of his relationships with teacher-mentors, demonstrated in his inability to ask for help.

> I have been in schools where I have just felt that some people are too busy or too stressed and I just keep away. You just get that feeling … They are so busy … you might be told the door is always open, but it really isn't. With a good mentor you feel like somebody is putting their arm around you and helping you.

Nick's words suggest an uneasiness in expressing any difficulties he may be having whilst also drawing on feminized images as support. His positioning and the discomfiture he felt might be explained in some way by Haywood and Mac an Ghaill's (2013) suggestion that

school culture is masculinized and calls for men to be efficient and rational, completely at odds with any need for comfort and care. What was missing for Nick were cultural spaces within the figured world which valued non-hegemonic and more caring-oriented expressions of masculinity as advocated by Hookway & Cruickshank (2024) in their analysis of the decline in the numbers of Australian male primary teachers.

Mark's descriptions of his experiences whilst training highlight the discomfort he felt as 'the only male in the school'. He struggles to articulate why it was difficult for him to 'integrate into the school'. He explains why he felt that way:

> Just the conversations. Girly things. I'm not saying that I'm a 'boy-boy' but … it was just in the staffroom. Not in the classroom, the teaching side of things. It was the personal, getting on with others.

Mark's reflections suggest that his struggle to fit in may stem from difficulties with 'personal' relationships in school. He clarifies that his teaching and the relationships he made in the classroom were 'fine', but it was the feminized conversations in the staffroom that made him feel uncomfortable, reflecting Cruickshank's (2019) findings that staffrooms can be a challenge for male primary teachers as feminized spaces. Mark makes it clear that the cause of his discomfort stems from the environment and not his ability to develop positive relationships. In clarifying, he self-authors as someone who was not overly masculine: not a 'boy-boy', that answers any critique of gender stereotypical behaviour, aligning with both Jones's (2007) Millenium Man and Warin's (2017) 'gender flexible' approach.

Like Mark, Leo also describes feeling awkward and uncomfortable in the staffroom:

> Sometimes they tell jokes where men are the butt of the jokes, and they are all looking at me when they tell it. I think they are trying to get a reaction. I just look at them, as whatever I say is going to be the wrong thing so I will just look at you until you move on.

In this comment, Leo is restricted in being able to 'joke' with the other members of staff as the 'joke' is about him as a man. Implicit in Leo's narrative is his lack of agency within this space as he is reduced to a non-verbal response. Leo's narrative positions him as vulnerable and uncomfortable in his need to withdraw from the situation. Both Mark and Leo's narratives support Eldred et al.'s (2022) conclusion that the development of positive professional relationships is crucial for male primary teachers working in environments where there are limited connections with men.

Being othered

Craig introduces the gender dimension explicitly as part of his struggle with being positioned as 'Other' within his placement school. In his account, he describes his third-year placement as 'a nightmare'. He starts by telling me about his teacher-mentor who 'was an absolute nutcase'.

> She hated, well, she never said this, but she hated students. And she hated men. At one stage she boasted about how she had made two students quit placement … to me! She said, "Do you remember such and such, he didn't last long?", and "Such and such, he couldn't hack it either?"

Initially, Craig uses humour, a recognized masculine characteristic (Jones 2007; Martino 2008) to frame his experiences with his teacher-mentor, although his choice of words implies that it was a stressful and difficult time for him. Craig's imitation of his teacher-

mentor recounting her experiences with other male student teachers enables him to position her as unreasonable and unkind, orchestrating multiple 'voices', real and imagined, provides agency to challenge the validity of how he was positioned as 'Other' – both as a student and as a man. Significantly, these 'voices' that position male student teachers as failures and weak, appears to have had a negative impact on their ability to build relationships within these spaces in the primary school: the male student teachers seemingly punished for their 'Otherness' (Francis 2012).

Chris stories himself as being positioned inaccurately and uncomfortably by significant others within the figured world as he references the dominant gender discourse of being under surveillance as a potential paedophile. Chris describes his struggle against this monoglossic discourse tentatively, never actually articulating what the problem is. His dialogic response suggests feelings of awkwardness in being positioned as 'soft and sinister' (Palmer et al. 2020) and alludes to demonstrating strength and resilience to cope with the experience:

> There's so much stigma attached because of the media and people talking … You're always being judged and looked at differently to the female members of staff … You've got to show that you've broken the mould and you're not like the media portray and what people expect.

Chris describes his struggle against these images, he is, in Bakhtin's words, 'striving to liberate himself from the influence of such an image and its discourse by means of objectification' (1981, 348). His defiant response to the monoglossic gender discourse of men under suspicion when working with children supports Chris's self-authoring as different to the negative public perception of male teachers. He continues to answer voices from this discourse using alternative voices drawn from real and imagined conversations:

> They [parents] say, "Have you heard about this male teacher all this messing around? They're not suitable for the job." You can hear it and although they don't know you're in the profession … they expect you to join in with them, "Yeah, that's disgusting … " If I'd have said to them "actually, I'm in the profession", I wonder if their reaction would have been different. If I'd have told them … , Would they have looked at me differently, tarred me with the same brush?

Reflecting Bakhtin's (1981) 'heteroglossia', Chris' internal dialogue with both imaginary and real others, from the past, present, and future provides agency for him to challenge those with authority in the figured world and resist the monoglossia that positions him as a paedophile. His narrative, gathered in the dialogic interview space, is a vehicle for agency enabling him to define his 'identity-in-practice' (Black et al. 2010), clarifying to me who he is not.

Finding a more comfortable fit

Being in demand

All the men in my study find comfort and security in 'real men' positions that support traditional images of masculinity as a response to their lesser positioning (Martino 2008). Most of them discuss the prestigious position of being 'in demand' in primary schools and 'actively sought after' as men, even going as far as to say that it directed them towards this choice of career. Nick, in his description of his career aspirations, broaches the subject:

> "You'll be fine, you're male, you'll just walk into a job." If I heard it once, I've heard it a thousand times. I find it a bit patronising to be honest. It might be true … It gives me a reassurance that if there is a demand for male teachers that perhaps my job is more stable than others.

Being highly valued as a man in the job market makes Nick feel uncomfortable although it is difficult to resist due to the personal gains and job security it provides. He mixes the voices together, an example of Bakhtin's heteroglossia at work, hybridizing the languages available for him, those claiming and rejecting gender privileges, giving weight to both. Although the dominant gender discourse of 'being in demand' positions Nick with more status, it also ignores his ability to teach, positioning him as lesser than and making him feel 'patronized'.

Chris also stories himself as being in demand, although does not seem uneasy about the gender privileges afforded to him as a man. He draws on dominant gender discourses that suggest men bring both a gender balance to the primary teaching workforce and are a 'natural' role model, especially for boys (Brownhill 2014; Skelton 2007). Chris makes it clear to me that these discourses are recognized and accepted by significant others in the figured world, strengthening the legitimacy of his privileged position:

> I was always told that there was a shortage of male teachers … I might find it easier than females to get a job at the end of it. I always felt I was able to be a bit more choosy … there is that shortage and the male role model is just as important. That's come from governors at schools, teachers at schools, fellow professionals.

Chris seems to be addressing both the gender monoglossic voice of male power and privilege that enables him to be picky when looking for his first teaching post and heteroglossic discourse formed from voices that have experience of the ECT job market that suggest he takes the first job offered. He creates a privileging space in our interview through evocation of these voices from others, enabling him to enact agency to story himself with more status than his teaching experience warrants.

Being rare and different to female teachers

The men in my study used phrases such as being 'a bit unusual' or 'a picture of interest' in a positive way to describe what could be construed as a lesser position available to them in the primary school. Mark talks about how people initially view him in school – being a man is what is noticed first:

> A lot of people think, 'we've got a male'. We're quite fortunate in our school as we have got four male teachers. Quite a lot of parents comment on how many males we have got in the school. It's like it's quite a big shock really to have male teachers in a primary school.

What is important here is that Mark connects his rarity as a male primary teacher to a privileged and powerful position that contradicts with being young and relatively inexperienced. He draws on the words of parents, significant figures, to support his authoring as scarce, although there is no mention that people see him as a good teacher.

Like Mark, Chris describes himself as 'different' in the primary school. His 'present' self is closely related with his gendered vision of schooling as he starts by explaining that 'kids' see him as 'more interesting' than female teachers who are 'the norm', reproducing male

power and diminishing the importance of what women bring to teaching. He orchestrates the imagined viewpoints of children he teaches to validate his self-authoring as a successful teacher:

> I think the kids get excited when they see a guy walking through the door, just a new face at all, that's always exciting, but when a guy walks in I think, especially the younger children, they get more excited.

Chris compares the impact he has as both a new teacher in school and a new *male* teacher. In his description of himself, he tells me how the children respond positively to his hegemonic masculine identity, explicitly categorizing male and female teachers as separate groups with different interests. He explains why this happens, drawing on specific global stories:

> I think the older children think … oh, there's someone I can go and have a chat about football with … females may have an interest in football, but as soon as a guy walks in, they think, football club, we can talk about this and that, all these sports things.

Chris engages with the heteroglossic discourses that exist within the figured world of primary school, providing a space for agency to reposition himself as high status. He draws on the monoglossic gender account that positions men and boys as being interested in sport, especially football, to self-author a position of power amongst the children: a contrast to the identities that the participants described previously. Like Mark, Chris may be feeling heteronormative pressure to adhere to normal 'masculine' expectations, for example, liking sport, to stop him feeling marginalized and counteract potential lesser positioning as a neophyte or as 'Othered' in a feminized working environment.

Most of the participants author themselves as fun, relaxed and amusing, widely recognized in the literature as masculine characteristics (Jones 2007; Skelton 2007) and describe how these traits help develop positive relationships in school. Craig talks about enjoying 'having a laugh' with staff, both male and female, whereas in Mark's school, 'even the Head [female] is involved in 'banter' and wind-ups', reflecting Cruikshank's (2019) findings where male primary teachers felt less isolated when they had naturally developed rapport with female colleagues who had common interests or sense of humour. Leo talks about using humour that brings him affirmation and acceptance from children and staff. His reflections help strengthen his self-authoring: 'I can't yet think of a class that I have left that have not enjoyed working with me.' I then ask Leo if being male makes a difference in schools:

> I think maybe being a man means I do relate to the kids in a different way as I have different interests than some female teachers. I can talk about some superheroes and football. I wouldn't say I relate to kids in a different way because I am male just because of my different manner. I am relaxed, jovial.

Leo's narrative suggests an uneasiness and awkwardness he has with orchestrating discourse from the monoglossic gender matrix (Francis 2012). He initially describes himself by referencing gender discourse that stereotypes male interests to categorize his practice as different from female teachers. However, his use of words such as 'maybe' and 'some' distance him from recognizable male figures, his response restricted in its reference to the hegemonic masculine performances. Although he tries to explain that his behaviour is not gendered, he is unable to enact agency and offer any alternative response to those associated with dominant gender discourses.

Holland et al. (1998) distinguish between those identities that relate to figured worlds themselves – recognized characters evoked through stories – and those that relate to our social position in the world relative to others. Positionality, according to Holland et al., is integral to developing an understanding of ourselves in relation to others, mediated through our feelings of comfort or discomfort. The male primary teachers' positioning was a significant element in their narratives as neophytes in school. They spoke of being positioned by their teacher-mentors, parents, and the children they taught. In their descriptions of their everyday activities and relations, participants talked about being positioned in both comfortable and uncomfortable positions, or in Jones's (2007, 192) terms: 'as winners or losers'. They described feeling vulnerable and isolated during their teacher training – restricted in their self-authoring as students and as men. In response to their low status, the participants drew on available discourses that aligned themselves to hegemonic masculine identities and behaviours, particularly in their use of humour and interest in sport. These characteristics are seen as specific to men that are positive for young boys – and girls – and that only men can offer. These 'natural' qualities are considered superior to women's knowledges and practices, position men as distinctive and important and continue to reproduce gender inequality and binarised gender identities and behaviours.

Alternative spaces of authoring

Father figure and role model

This concluding section focuses on the narratives of Chris, Craig, Leo, and Mark as more experienced teachers. Unfortunately, Nick declined to be interviewed in the final round. Although they still draw on monoglossic gender discourses, as they had done during the other times we had met, as practiced teachers they are starting to orchestrate these discourses differently in an alternative 'space of authoring' (Holland et al. 1998).

A significant aspect in the participants' final accounts is their reactions to being a role model for the children they teach, a commonly assumed role for male primary teachers (Brownhill 2014). Craig's narrative is illustrative of how they continue to reference dominant gender discourses, but their heteroglossic responses nuance their positioning and consequently, their identity.

> The group of kids you have look to you as a role model. It takes quite a while to get used to being that figure, being responsible … Being a man, they look to you, especially at the start. It's quite hard to start with. In September they are kind of looking to you to be a father figure. That was hard to get my head around. They really look up to you. One of them even said, "I wish you were my dad". I don't know how I feel about that. You don't really want to get that close to them, but it is nice, it's rewarding.

There is a recognition here that being a male role model is not easy as it comes with responsibility. Craig authors as a 'father figure', although acknowledging this identity has been difficult to come to terms with. His response positions both male and female teachers in terms of historical familial discourses, valorizing the 'father figure' role whilst diminishing women's capacities and strengths. Craig's narrative highlights the restrictions male primary teachers have in authoring themselves within the monoglossic

gender matrix, which Francis (2012) notes affords certain positions and identities for men, although they may not always welcome them.

Heteroglossia is evident in the narrative and illustrates how male primary teachers may have to negotiate themselves within both professional and personal boundaries that are contradictory – being a primary teacher who cares and being a man: reflective of Jones' (2007) 'gender chameleons'. Craig's 'current' self is rooted in the powerful gender discourses that position him as important and essential and at the same time 'disadvantaged 'tokens''(Cousins 2020, 38) strengthening the idea of male teachers feeling under pressure to maintain a physical distance from the children they teach to avoid suspicion (Martino 2008). To counteract being positioned as 'Other', he acknowledges that there are emotional gains in being a role model and developing close relations with children.

Choosing a different career trajectory

As beginning teachers, the participants talked openly about the distinct possibility of becoming a Headteacher, notable in workforce statistics as being disproportionately occupied by men (DfE 2023). As more experienced teachers, they can nuance this position, recognizing the challenges it brings, and in doing so, can begin to create a reimagined identity for themselves. Mark stories himself as someone who wants to develop professionally:

> I want to improve, get better and better. I've had lots of opportunities to develop where I am. I was offered a job for a senior management role [in another school]. 'I've got a job for you; you'll be great for it'. I felt I couldn't walk away from the job I've just started.

He talks about how he has rejected the offer of promotion, alluding to his reasons for turning the offer down and answering the Headteacher's voice that is encouraging him to apply for this new post. Mark changes course in his next comment as he explains his decision in more detail: 'For me it is not the money. I'm not doing it for that'. Here, in this alternative space of authoring, he is continuing to address and respond to the Headteacher's voice and in doing so, he self-authors someone who contradicts hegemonic masculine ideals of promotion into leadership and financial gain driving men's career choices (Fullard 2023).

Craig also rejects hegemonic masculine ideals as he tells me that he is not in primary teaching for financial gain.

> I love teaching, I absolutely love it! I think you have to love it; I think if you didn't love it, it would be too much work, it wouldn't justify what you get paid. I can't imagine doing anything else now. It's amazing! It's my dream job, it's brilliant!

Crag's final account demonstrates how he has found a career where he comfortably fits, although he may not have the financial gains that discourse suggests he should be afforded as a man. He tells me that he is not averse to 'being on the Senior Leadership Team in the future. I am interested in that sort of stuff. I quite like making decisions and trying to support and help other people.' It seems that Craig is still aligning himself to hegemonic masculine ideals, however, it is combined with a reference to a more caring role, demonstrating that he is beginning to orchestrate the heteroglossic voices to nuance his future trajectory as a man in primary teaching.

Chris also authors himself as someone interested in developing professionally, who 'wants to have impact' in his new school. He talks about how he has changed his

perception of what it means to be a primary teacher. Reflecting on the school he has just left he describes a world where: 'schools are looked at as too much of a business':

> They are managed in a particular way: "They are managers not teachers! I don't want this!" This new school hopefully will take me in a different direction … It was difficult, I was trying my hardest to say, "But we are still a school. These children matter more than data". But it's a business, you are measured on your productivity. It's a shame my journey ended like it did, but I didn't think the way it was heading was right for me.

Within Chris's self-authoring, he directly addresses the changing values around education, argued to have led to a 'remasculinisation of schooling' (Haywood and Mac an Ghaill 2013). The heteroglossic environment is visible in how he orchestrates voices of the past and present. His response to these voices provides some insight into his earlier lack of agency as a beginning teacher and how though he 'tried hard', he was unable to make his voice heard. In contrast, Chris talks about his new school where they 'are so friendly and outgoing. Everyone is putting the school first and putting the children and their learning first … I'm worried that my teaching won't fit.' This is the first time, in the third and final interview, I hear him prioritizing children's learning and questioning his own teaching ability. It is clear how his own professional values have shifted, where what is important is becoming recognized as being an effective teacher and not just a man.

He continues by acknowledging things have changed for his ideas of the future.

> It's not something I thought about. Perhaps earlier on, 10 years, I might be working my way up. Realistically now, do you know? I'm not that bothered. I know teachers [in leadership] and they're not happy. I've not got that responsibility. I'm happy doing what I'm doing, find somewhere nice to perch.

Chris's opening line suggests that this is a new space of authoring for him. By reflecting on his previous figuring – noting that there has been a shift in how he is authoring himself – he addresses his past self who may have wanted a leadership position and instead self-authors someone who is more cautious about occupying such a responsible position in the future. The analogy completes his self-authoring and illustrates how he has chosen a new, comfortable space where he can make a stance against the powerful gender discourses that position him as a leader.

Conclusion and implications

The data presented in this paper tell us many things about positionality and agency. Most of the male primary teachers' stories tell of an adherence to gender-traditional identity performances to 'fit' into the figured world of primary school. The impact of dominant gender discourses on identity work is significant in its ability to support their self-authoring as powerful and important when being positioned as a student teacher or 'Other' in a feminized environment. As neophytes in the primary school, they reference struggling to mediate an alternative response to dominant gender discourse. In many cases, evocations of hegemonic masculine identities and performances brought tensions as they spoke of feeling uncomfortable in claiming gender privileges afforded to them as men.

Francis (2012) asserts that inconsistent gender performances have the potential to disrupt the monoglossic account of gender and produce identities and identity

performances that do not fall within dominant or contradictory accounts of gender. For these male primary teachers, developing an increased awareness of themselves and the social world over time brought a stronger sense of agency. They were starting to improvise within the discourses and practices that were available for them and liberate themselves, albeit in small ways, from the discursive environment.

Through application of a strong conceptual framework, this paper illuminates the multiplicity and inconsistency of responses people can have to their situation and enables a greater understanding of how, through an enactment of some agency, male primary teachers may start to choose an alternative way to be and behave that goes beyond the purely discursive identities. Drawing on Bakhtin's concept of dialogism, my methodological stance highlights the importance of conceptualizing the research interview as dialogic, where our 'identity-in-practice' is made visible (Black et al. 2010). Directing focus to the multiple voices within the male primary teachers' responses to their social and cultural environment leads to in-depth findings in relation to their on-going identity production and performances.

Finally, continuing to gather information on how male primary teachers experience the world for themselves will help to inform how schools and teacher education programmes support men during their early careers as primary teachers with an acknowledgement that there is potential for these teachers to begin to break free from the discursive constraints of the environment and start to imagine themselves otherwise.

Disclosure statement

Notes on contributors

Corinne Woodfine is a teacher educator. Her teaching focuses on primary education, with particular interests in gender, identity and the status and positioning of teachers. She draws largely on socio-cultural theories, primarily the work of Dorothy Holland and Bakhtin.

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