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'Rutting stags' and 'sly foxes': Gender positioning boys and girls through social, emotional and behavioural work on the school playground

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Abstract

In recent years, there has been an increased focus on the development of children's social, emotional and behavioural skills in schools, via a swathe of classroom-based schemes and more general, relational and emotional approaches to pedagogy. With a now established but growing evidence base focusing upon the outcomes of such social, emotional and behavioural work for schools and children, calls have been made for research that makes a gender critical analysis of such work. This article is grounded in a conceptual framework that positions gender as socially constructed and performative and draws on qualitative data gathered in a series of focus group and individual interviews with primary school practitioners. The findings demonstrate how gender binary beliefs influence perceptions of the behaviours displayed by boys and girls in play-based situations as well as the social, emotional and behavioural work carried out by staff in response. The implications of these findings, in terms of the positioning of, and responses to the social, emotional and behavioural difficulties presented by boys and girls on the schoolyard are discussed and suggestions for future practice are made.

INTRODUCTION

The promotion of children's social, emotional and behavioural skills is firmly embedded within the daily practices of schools, through a variety of means. Targeted schemes, such as nurture groups, and social and emotional learning, designed to enhance children's social, inter- and intrapersonal skills have been and continue to be popular platforms whereby schools provide social and emotional nourishment to their pupils (see Vincent, 2017; Wigelsworth et al., 2023). A mastery of emotional pedagogy (Gillies, 2011), and relational approaches to the explicit teaching of social and emotional skills, which both place emphasis on educators' ability to understand, interpret and respond to children's emotional cues, are central to the successful delivery of a social and emotional curriculum (Roffey, 2017). Yet, while gender has consistently been seen to permeate schooling in countless ways, research investigating the social, emotional and behavioural work performed by educational practitioners has largely remained gender blind (Evans, 2017). This article aims to fill this void in the research literature by sharing the views of primary school staff members who enacted their social, emotional and behavioural work with children on the school playground in gender dualistic ways, with gender role positioning (Warin, 2018) and reinforcement highly prominent in their practice and interactions with the children, outside of the classroom. Largely unexplored in the research, the playground is the specific focus of this article in that it is an arena that may enable children's social and emotional learning through a play-based approach. Consequently, the purpose of this study was to explore how primary school staff members attribute gendered significance to their own social, emotional and behavioural work with pupils engaged in play activities, in one space within the school context, the playground.

Conceptual framework

This article's conceptual framework is grounded in the principle that gender is socially and culturally constructed, utiltising a range of theoretical positions offered by the likes of Bem (1981) and Butler (1999). Children learn gender-related ideas and behaviours from their many environments, including schools, and within their cultures, and these gender schemas (Bem, 1981), influence how children perceive their own and others' behaviours in relation to these. For Butler (1999), our desire to conform with social norms influences the likelihood of the performance of largely ritualistic behaviours and acts, societally deemed as feminine or masculine, as a means of re-affirming one's gender status. Such gender performativity, thus, 'becomes part of the internalised gender construction of the individual' (Sheehy & Solvason, 2023, p. 2), with those who refuse or fail to perform gender adequately particularly vulnerable to marginalisation (Butler, 1999).

Schooling of those in the early years, throughout compulsory age education and beyond, is dominated by the delivery and promotion of gendered attitudes and expectations, where students learn what it is to be a boy or a girl (Paechter, 2007). In these arenas, there are clear differences between the two (Goble et al., 2012) and the concept of gender is applied as binary, with people positioned as male or female, and heterosexual (Garcia & Slesaransky-Poe, 2010).

As such, this article utilises Connell's (2005) framework of masculinities as a guiding principle in the interpretation of data gathered to help illustrate how children, through social, emotional and behavioural work, are positioned in gendered ways. Connell's (2005) notion of hegemonic masculinity—the dominant, traditional form of masculinity that is privileged and upheld by society over women, other gender identities and other forms of masculinity such as complicit, subordinate and marginalised masculinity—provides a framework by which the findings will be understood. Furthermore, work on gender hegemony, which constructs gender difference as naturalised by normative assumptions of sexual desire and difference is also adopted here, as 'the hegemonic work of fusing masculinity and femininity together as complementary opposites' (Schippers, 2007, p. 90) positions heterosexuality as normative aspects of hegemonic masculinity and femininity. Some ways in which schools act as sites of gender performance and reinforcement are explored next.

Schools as sites of gender performance and reinforcement

Schools have long been regarded as active makers (Mac An Ghaill, 1994) of masculinity and femininity. Across the broad range of educational topics that make up the curriculum, and more widely within the everyday activities of schools, regimes of truth (Foucault, 1977) that adopt gendered learning and the positioning of the male and female binary are prioritised. In terms of the delivery of the curriculum itself, within topics such as science and within the spaces where it is taught, territorialisation of knowledge where hegemonic masculinity gives prominence to boys' learning, as their behaviours go unchecked by teachers, over girls', as their interests in scientific pursuits are met with suspicion, is just one case in point (Ivinson & Murphy, 2007). Over a 50-year period and beyond, children's reading books have been seen as key resources they draw on to make sense of gender (Jackson & Gee, 2005). Research over time (see Freebody & Baker, 1987; Gooden & Gooden, 2001; Ladow, 1976; Peterson & Lach, 1990) has consistently demonstrated how reading materials within schools reinforce gender, with males being referenced more and mainly as the protagonist, in comparison to females, in addition to males being positioned as active and females as passive. Constancy with gender positioning and reinforcement continues across all phases of schooling, including secondary schools, in the delivery of topics like Sex Education, where young women's bodies are constructed as reproductive and their owners as caring, nurturing, motherly and passive (Graham et al., 2017).

The spaces that children occupy and the activities they engage in, within them, are also highly gendered. A recent analysis of Forest Schools—child-centred approaches to outdoor learning, where sessions are regular, long-term, learner-centred, play-based, practised in a natural or woodland environment, and led by an accredited practitioner (Hine, 2023)—follows suit, with aggressive and dominant behaviours more likely to be displayed by boys than girls, over the majority of the time of the sessions (Hine, 2023). Furthermore, girls' refusal to engage in some activities was, instead of being seen as acts of assertiveness, viewed as a display of passivity by staff, with the author concluding that 'children's constructions of gender appeared more rigidly governed by conventional norms in Forest School, overall, than in the classroom' (Hine, 2023, p. 12). Furthermore, young children's development and understanding of gender through play, where concepts of boy and girl are actively performed, is a long-standing area of research (see Josephidou, 2020; Synodi, 2010). On the playground, there is not only the adoption by girls of domestic and caring skills, and boys of adventurous and violent roles (Bosacki et al., 2015), but their promotion by staff. This in turn gives prominence to gender separation and power dynamics

with boys learning that their aggressive behaviours allow them to occupy space, reinforcing the likelihood of these behaviours being repeated (Kollmayer et al., 2018). This article contributes to work in this field in capturing how a range of school practitioners utilise gendered narratives to inform their social, emotional and behavioural work with children on the school playground, an area currently lacking in meaningful investigation.

Gender performance and enactment are also largely influenced by various stakeholders within schools. Through processes associated with group socialisation (Harris, 1995), students, part of larger peer groups, experience pressure and harassment to act according to normative expectations of gender (Sexton, 2012). Particularly prevalent among boys (Robinson, 2005), which in turn reinforces hegemonic masculinity as the norm, subordinating all other forms of masculinity (Meyer, 2008), such conscious teaching and encouragement of gendered behaviours, by children, has an established evidence base (see Lamb et al., 2009). So too, though, has the role of educators in combatting such behaviours, through the establishment of cultures grounded in gender flexibility, which allow children to challenge the widespread othering of the variety of femininities and masculinities in schools (Martino & Rezai-Rashti, 2012). Yet, from the early years onwards, the construction of gender and the privileging of hegemonic displays of femininity and masculinity persist in practice. Gendered expectations of adults have been seen to influence how teachers interact and communicate with students according to gender norms (Francis, 2010, with the language they use often tailored for boys and girls (Chick et al., 2002). While those educators who hold traditionally gendered beliefs are more likely to segregate children by gender, making it more explicit (Farago et al., 2022), competent and experienced teachers who maintain they treat children fairly according to gender often adopt gendered positions of girls as emotional and boys as active (Wingrave, 2018). Consequently, and as has been explored, schools have been identified as arenas where boys learn to be boys and girls learn to be girls (Paechter, 2007). In the next section, I explore some ways in which social, emotional and behavioural work is conducted in schools, and make the case for the need to research such work in a gender critical way.

Researching social, emotional and behavioural work in schools—The omission of gender

The explicit teaching of children's social, emotional and behavioural skills in schools, in spaces including the playground, does so through a variety of means as part of a move towards a more social and emotional curriculum (Roffey, 2017). Categorised under the umbrella term, Social and Emotional Learning (SEL), children learn a broad range of social, emotional and behavioural skills including, but not limited to emotional self-regulation, social skills, empathy, decision-making, self-awareness and motivation (Wigelsworth et al., 2023). In schools, SEL is often delivered across three waves, the first at the whole school level within the teaching of skills within a classroom setting and via assemblies. The second is small group sessions designed to facilitate children's social, emotional and behavioural skills, and the third is via one-to-one support with pupils deemed to need such intervention. Stemming largely from the work of Boxall (2002), Nurture Group provision has been and continues to be another effective tool by which schools aim to support children emotionally, in an environment removed from the main classroom, as a means of enhancing their social skills and ability to initiate and maintain relationships with others. Furthermore, calls for more relational pedagogic approaches that prioritise skills such as emotionality, care and professional love as central to the teaching profession have been made (Page, 2018). Grounding such social, emotional and

behavioural work in an ethic of care (Noddings, 2002) should help in the establishment of authentic, reciprocal and enduring relationships, where social, emotional and behavioural skills can flourish (Page, 2018).

Despite recognition that the quality and effectiveness of the social, emotional and behavioural work taking place in schools is highly influenced by its fidelity, dosage, quality, responsiveness and differentiation (see Durlak, 2015), there remains a necessity to move towards a more nuanced understanding of the interpretations of such work and variations in its enactment (see Humphrey and Wigelsworth, 2016; Roffey, 2017). One arena that may influence the way such work is understood and carried out on the school playground, but yet to be sufficiently explored, is gender, with claims that research exploring social, emotional and behavioural work in schools more widely has largely remained gender blind (Evans, 2017). As such, 'the role of educational practitioners in inculcating students with gendered emotional subjectivities' and the potential for gender 'binaries (to be) instantiated through the micro-practices of emotional pedagogy' (Evans, 2017, p. 187) have long been overlooked and are widely neglected in play settings, such as school playgrounds. Consequently, this article pays specific attention to this research gap by exploring the extent to which the social, emotional and behavioural work taking place within schools on the playground is understood in light of, and used to reinforce gendered behaviours. In this regard, and as the findings presented later reveal, relational pedagogic practices performed by staff were often utilised to scaffold children's play interaction on the playground in highly gendered ways. Prior to sharing the findings that provide the basis for this stance, in the next section, I provide an overview of the methodological approaches taken within the main research study.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The data utilised in this article emerged from a study with the aim of capturing how primary school staff members understood, valued and utilised social, emotional and behavioural work in their everyday practice, identified as an area lacking in research (see Wigelsworth et al., 2023). This article, specifically, explores the extent to which such practitioners attribute gendered significance to their own social, emotional and behavioural work with pupils engaged in play activities, on the playground and, as such, pays attention to the following research questions:

1. According to staff, how are children's social, emotional and behavioural displays in play-based learning situations, such as playgrounds, influenced by gendered narratives?
2. To what extent and in what ways is the range of social, emotional and behavioural work in play-based learning situations interpreted, understood and enacted by staff in gendered ways?
3. What influences these interpretations, understandings and enactments of social, emotional and behavioural work in play-based learning situations?

One main strand of the research study explored the extent to which the social, emotional and behavioural work varied between staff, and between schools, and the influences behind these potential variations. In response, the study prioritised qualitative research strategies that focussed on the social, emotional and behavioural work interpretation and enactment taking place across four primary schools, all located in the north of England.

The schools

All four schools are state-funded, public schools, providing education to children between the ages of 5–11 years, and as issued by law, all deliver the statutory primary national curriculum, which includes the programme of study, subject content and attainment targets. The four schools were sampled, though, as they represented variation in terms of (i) the type and extent of social, emotional and behavioural work used; (ii) number of pupils on roll, with schools with large, medium and small pupil numbers selected; (iii) number of pupils eligible for free school meals, which gives a short-hand indication of the level of affluence and social and economic disadvantage in the surrounding community. Schools with low, medium and high free school meal eligibility were sampled; (iv) location, with schools based in urban and rural areas selected; (v) faith, with schools of differing religious character sampled and (vi) Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (OFSTED) rating, that judges the quality of the services providing education and skills for learners of all ages. Schools were sampled with varying Ofsted ratings, ranging from outstanding through to inadequate.

Tools of data collection

With a focus on interpretation and the potential for these to be different depending on both the practitioner's role and the schools in which they work, the study was grounded in interpretive principles and the acceptance of a multi-faceted vision of reality (Bryman, 2001). Consequently, data collection decisions were influenced by the need to gather such interpretations, perceptions and uses of social, emotional and behavioural work through qualitative means. Focus groups, within schools, were utilised, as the gathering of data could take place in non-threatening environments (Henninck, 2014), with people with whom the participants felt at ease, to facilitate the likelihood of greater depth of discussion of key points according to the research questions (Krueger & Casey, 2014). With an acknowledgement, however, that the data gathered within focus groups are always co-constructed, and that power differentials influence the views of those participating in such groups (see Kook et al., 2019), semi-structured, individual interviews were also used to allow practitioners to voice their opinions on issues important to them. Across both phases of data collection, themes explored included how social, emotional and behavioural work was interpreted and understood; the motivations behind its use; its purpose; the enactment of it by both the range of practitioners carrying it out, and the schools where they worked; how it was influenced by space; and its impact.

Participants

Sampling strategies across both focus group and semi-structured interview phases were purposive and non-random with the total number of participants across the former being 44, and across the latter being 24. There were 10 focus groups across the four sites, with two groups in each school consisting of management/teaching staff (head teachers, assistant head teachers, senior management, teachers) and non-teaching staff (pastoral staff such as learning mentors, teaching assistants, welfare staff, other support staff), and in the two larger schools an additional group in each with practitioners engaged in a range of roles across the 'whole school'. Six semi-structured individual interviews, within each of the four schools, were carried out with the following: a

member of the management team; the Special Education Needs Co-ordinator (SENDCo) or inclusion co-ordinator; a class teacher; a teaching assistant; a member of the pastoral team; and a welfare/support assistant. Approval to conduct the research was granted by the researcher's university ethics committee and was in keeping with the ethical considerations outlined by the British Educational Research Association (2018), including the right to withdrawal, gaining informed consent from all participants, the protection of data and the guarantee of confidentiality. Consequently, participants' names have been pseudonymised throughout this article, although information about their role in school is provided, as is their gender, denoted by /F for female staff and/M for male staff.

Data analysis

The focus group and individual interview transcripts were organised primarily in response to the research study's aims and questions and specifically their focus on the motivation for social, emotional and behavioural work implementation, how the range of this work was interpreted and enacted, and the variables that influenced these, all of which guided the thematic analysis of data. This began with an initial coding of data segments, followed next by an amalgamation of these common initial codes into larger categories, and then themes, before a final repeating of the process and checking of the identified themes across both the focus group and individual interview data sets (Bergin, 2018). As mentioned, the primary focus of the thematic analysis was to organise data into themes to help uncover some of the issues posed by the research questions, the outcome of which, focussing specifically on how the social, emotional and behavioural work performed by practitioners on the school playground space was couched in stereotypically gendered views, is reported in this article.

Limitations, boundaries and scope

At this point, there is a need to acknowledge some important limitations in the organisation and presentation of the data captured in the findings section, as a means of providing some boundaries and scope regarding their purpose. The findings reported in this article are homogeneous in nature, in that they draw on commonalities and consistencies across the range of staff members, across the four schools that participated in the qualitative phases. As such, it is acknowledged that the findings reported next are derived from a relatively small sample of staff members, from just four primary schools, all located in an area in Northern England, and all of whom adopt, to differing degrees, gender-biased language and assumptions in their positioning of social, emotional and behavioural work on the playground. While acknowledged that the findings presented next may not capture the nuances of individual staff member roles and responsibilities, nor the specific demographics and contexts of the schools, they go some way to clarifying issues captured by the research questions presented above.

FINDINGS

Gender-biased language was central within the responses garnered from the interviewees in this study. When speaking about the extent of social, emotional and behavioural work invested in

children within the schools, and specifically on the playground, the staff members interviewed often felt that boys, in comparison to girls, were and should be prioritised due to the activities they engaged in. Activities at break-times, particularly competitive sports like football, were identified as major factors in producing differing situations where conflict was common place between the children. In keeping with findings made by Jarvis (2007), that staff members working in primary schools view football as contributing to 'negative aspects of outdoor free play' (p. 259), this activity was perceived by many as a main cause of the social, emotional and behavioural problems experienced by boys at play time, resulting in a greater need to police these children. Such gender-biased assumptions were captured in the views of two staff members, interviewed within the study, as is shown below:

> **Amber (Welfare/F):** *Boys are just more aggressive than girls ... in anything that they do. It might flair out on the yard, in football,...the aggression just comes out. We need to be there for that.*

> **Lilian (TA/F):** *Competition on the yard can be one thing, and if that child has anger problems to start off with, the slightest thing can trigger this person off. In this school a lot of boys do get taken out for pastoral support because of how they behave when playing on the yard, be it football or sports.*

There is a firm evidence base to support the belief that young children learn, develop and enact their perceptions of gender through play, displaying the extremities of behaviours expected of boys and girls, and refining them over time (see Josephidou, 2020). In response, pastoral staff members within schools engaged with boys on the yard, at source, in the hope of proactively targeting the problem behaviours. Bob, a learning mentor/M, said: 'I do sports and I think one of the main reasons why I get the majority of boys (with behavioural issues) is because I do sports', while Simon, a male staff member with responsibilities for children identified by the school as needing behavioural intervention, said

> **Simon (Pastoral support/M):** *I will go and play football for twenty minutes on the playground, with individual lads or maybe two lads, that don't get on. Sometimes at lunchtimes, I'm on a separate yard than the rest of the children with one or two, or a few boys, playing football. I suppose I try and show them how it's done.*

While the consequences of gendered practitioner play practices has been downplayed in the research (see Van Polanen et al., 2017), it has been shown that if men engage in gender specific ways in play, then gender stereotypes may be reinforced among the children themselves (Borve, 2016), meaning the adoption of the practices such as those performed by Bob and Simon need careful consideration. The hegemonic displays of masculinity targeted by the schools were not only reserved for sports, however, as staff members also spoke regularly about boys displaying more visible, violent and aggressive behaviours in comparison to girls on the playground in general. Joanna, a teacher/F, maintained that 'boys can be violent ... (they) resolve the(ir) problem with a fight, whereas girls wouldn't fight', while Abigail, a head teacher/F, felt that boys' social and emotional difficulties on the yard often manifest in behaviours that are 'extremely aggressive ... like throwing (things), fighting, (and) swearing'. Abigail continued with her gendering of children in stating: 'Girls sulk and be bitches ... but you can cope with that, you can cope with squabbling girls', and this positioning of girls as 'bitchy' was supported elsewhere in the data set:

Researcher: *What kind of disruptive behaviour do the girls carry out? Do they carry out disruptive behaviour?*

Lucy (TA/F): *Yeah, they do. They do it in a way where they'll gather together and they'll do something mischievous together, but they'll do it as a whole, you know, bitchy like. Whereas boys, when they're fighting, they don't listen, they're unruly ... they're brash about it, they're proud of what they've done ... whereas the girls, they're bitchy about it, mischievous as a group.*

In keeping with narratives that problematise schooling as inadequate for boys (see Palmer, 2009), some maintained their direct, aggressive behaviours stemmed from issues with the 'taught curriculum as boring' (Alice—Head teacher/F) and 'school just not being fun' (Pamela—Inclusion co-ordinator/F) for boys, while others adopted more essentialist and deterministic positions on gender, maintaining 'genetics' (Ann-Marie—Inclusion co-ordinator/F), 'nature' (Edith—Welfare assistant/F) and 'too much testosterone' (Molly—Welfare assistant/F) influenced boys to partake in violent acts on the playground. Most commonly, however, staff members argued that boys and girls were expected to behave in particular ways, in essence male bodies being boy and female bodies being girl (Paechter, 2007), and that specific socio-cultural influences including parental expectations, the wider media, and values couched in class differences contributed to the behaviours displayed by boys and girls. Although acknowledged as problematic, the consumption of hegemonic discourses, in relation to the expectations that boys should be physically aggressive, but girls should not, were often adopted and repeated by the staff members interviewed in this study. The next two extracts illustrate this point:

Edith (Welfare/F): *Well, we automatically think of lads as being boisterous and rough, you know, with the football games and ... play fighting; it's just one of those things isn't it? It's what they like to do so they need the help for that ... but the girls don't need it, because they don't fight. In fact, I don't like seeing girls fight ... it's not lady like.*

Summer (Teacher/F): *We tend to see boys and girls quite differently because I've noticed....by and large we get 'nice girls' who are behaving better and attaining higher grades than the 'naughty boys', and I think sometimes we look at some children differently. I try not to, but I do think there is still a thing about 'quiet girls', and I wonder sometimes, in fact I know, that boys and girls are treated differently regarding the work we do with them emotionally.*

As boys, it was argued, also 'raised more disruption' (Sophie—Inclusion co-ordinator/F) and jeopardised the practitioners' ability to instruct and teach, it was they who were often targeted through additional social, emotional and behavioural work. The enactment of pastoral support and emotional work as specifically purposeful for boys shows further accommodation of boy-friendly material and practice within schools, where young boys are free to conduct hegemonic, masculine pursuits (Haywood & Mac An Ghaill, 2013). While instances of both a patriarchal dividend (Connell, 1996) and of sacrificial girls (Charlton et al., 2007) are present within the positioning and utilisation of the social, emotional and behavioural work by staff within the school, these views were also held by school leaders, as the following extract shows:

> **Abigail (Head teacher/F):** *Boys are the ones that have the most problems with behaviour, and struggle emotionally. That's where the support should be, and is, in this school. Girls are sly foxes ... they go behind people's backs, they don't fight the same..., they still want to be cool and they still want to be in a crowd, all kids want that, but girls and boys show how cool they are in different ways. It's not about rutting stags for girls, but I think it is for boys. Boys become rutting stags in the classroom or on the yard, and that's why it's the boys that need this support.*

As has been alluded to in the extracts above, the responses by staff to the emotional and behavioural difficulties encountered were also highly gendered and, in the main, consistently so when performed by both male and female staff. One noticeable exception came in their affirmation of a need to adopt the position of a role model for children. Across all the data, there was not a single instance where female staff members alluded to their social, emotional and behavioural work using the language of a role model, yet for many male staff members, a perceived need to be a positive male role model for boys seemingly guided their practice. Alex, a male behaviour support worker, maintained that his social, emotional and behavioural work predominantly took place on the playground and was focused on 'mainly boys ... to address their anger problems ... or if they can't interact ... (and) just being a male role model for the boys'. Justifying this male-on-male support in terms of role modelling behaviours was apparent in the views of staff whose primary responsibility in school was pastoral support and emotions work on the playground, with male staff members claiming their roles were about showing boys 'how it's done' (Simon—Pastoral support/M) and 'how to always respond' (Bob—Learning mentor/M). This strategy was justified by the belief that female adults and girls, and male adults and boys, have 'more in common' (Bob), as is touched upon in extracts offered by two learning mentors at different schools:

> **Rebeka (Learning mentor/F):** *The girls bicker ... but there's quite a lot of staff who are female and they can tolerate that because they're female. I guess they remember this from their school days, so they can relate to it. I know I work with the girls partly because I feel I get on better with them, because I'm a woman.*

> **Bob (Learning mentor/M):** *I'm the boys' male role model ... because they just need strong boundaries, a father figure ... I think a female and a female will probably link better together, whereas a male will get on with lads more because they'll have more in common. I've never come across a girl yet that has got anger issues ... I don't work with many girls. The girls that have been referred always end up working with female staff ... because they could probably relate to them more and they'll have more to talk about.*

Although here Rebeka and Bob quite unproblematically assume their gender better positions them to work with girls in the former's case and boys in the latter's, such passive adoption and performances of these gendered roles may have ramifications for the children themselves moving forward. Bearing in mind the poststructuralist emphasis on the ways boys and girls construct themselves and are constructed as feminine or masculine through the performance of gender (Butler, 1999; Paechter, 2007; Walkerdine, 1990), the impact of such support on the playground may manifest in a reduction in gender equality if the practitioners involved adopt gender-specific ways of working and interacting with the children (Warin & Adriany, 2017). The data explored above, captured well in Abigail's labelling of boys as 'rutting stags' and girls as 'sly foxes', and the consequent responses of schools to prioritise boys' social, emotional and behavioural work, add

further support for findings within the early childhood education sector of the reproduction of gender inequalities in schools and the role of practitioner–pupil interactions in both constructing and reinforcing them (Wilkinson & Pearson, 2009). The discussion in the next section picks up on this point and explores some of the consequences of such gender role positioning and potential ways of responding to it.

DISCUSSION

The findings capture an adherence, albeit by a small number of staff, to gender role positioning (Warin, 2018) not only in terms of their own social, emotional and behavioural work in schools but also in the expectations they place on the children, outside of the classroom on the playground. This was largely facilitated by a somewhat passive acceptance of gender scripts (Burn & Pratt-Adams, 2015) to govern their interpretation of behaviours displayed by girls and boys and how they, as practitioners, responded to them. The description of girls as 'sly foxes' (Abigail/F), whose most pertinent social, emotional and behavioural difficulties were termed '*bitchy*' (Lucy/F, Amber/F) demonstrates the adoption, by some, of highly gendered and damaging tropes that frame girls' behaviours, certainly in terms of relational aggression on the playground, as mean and cruel (Ryalls, 2012). This vilification of 'girls' patterns of communication', stems from calls to increase the monitoring of their activities, in places like school playgrounds, in a move to subdue 'the "threat" of female aggression' (Ryalls, 2012, p. 463). However, while girls' social, emotional and behavioural difficulties were discussed often across the sample of staff members interviewed, there was a distinct lack of acknowledgement of work to specifically target these behaviours. Instead, and perhaps due to its indirect, often covert nature, the social, emotional and behavioural issues displayed by girls were deemed as unimportant in this study's schools, as something 'you can cope with' (Abigail/F). The identification of these social, emotional and behavioural difficulties, and their active dismissal, is a further demonstration of the product of sacrificial girls in educational establishments, where girls' interests have been neglected in a variety of ways, across multiple locations, so that the interests of boys can be maintained (see Charlton et al., 2007). While the marginalisation of girls' academic school performance has a well-established evidence base (see Francis & Skelton, 2005; Weaver-Hightower, 2003), the findings made here contribute new knowledge in its application to the social, emotional and behavioural work carried out with girls in response to their playground behaviours.

The construction of indirect aggression on the yard as normatively feminine, and the apathetic response to it, captured by the data shared and depicted in Abigail's view that 'you can cope with squabbling girls', was in stark contrast to the social, emotional and behavioural difficulties displayed by boys. Instead, their frequent displays of physical aggression on the playground, positioned as normatively masculine, endured an altogether different response. While more subordinate (Connell, 2005) forms of masculinity influenced the social, emotional and behavioural work of a few male staff members, and their prioritisation of soft skills such as 'listening', 'valuing people' (Fred/M) and 'communicating effectively' (Stanley/M), on the whole, male staff members in this study were largely complicit in reinforcing hegemonic displays of masculinity in their identification of, and responses to the behavioural difficulties displayed by boys on the playground. Furthermore, staff members, regardless of gender, viewed the physical, 'extremely aggressive' (Abigail/F) and 'violent' (Joanna/F) behaviours of boys with a degree of inevitability, and there was commonality across schools that such displays of social, emotional and behavioural difficulties on the playground warranted a targeted response. In keeping with

some historical foci on boys' concerns in policy, research and practice, encapsulated previously by concepts including recuperative masculinity politics (Lingard and Douglas 1999) and notions related to the boy turn (Weaver-Hightower, 2003), the findings made here reveal a continuation of a patriarchal dividend (Connell, 1996) outside of the classroom on the playground, with the investments made by schools and their practitioners in boys' social, emotional and behavioural skill development in play-based learning interactions. The adoption of the position of 'male role model' by Alex/M and Bob/M, led, specifically in the latter's case, to the prioritisation of conventional hegemonic notions of masculinity, such as that of a disciplinarian. Both Alex and Bob rejected the range of masculinities needed when acting as a positive male role model, as advocated by the likes of Salisbury and Jackson (1996) and captured by Jones' (2007, p. 190) concept of the 'millennium man', who prioritises progressive actions, such as sensitiv[ity] and caring, in favour of their supposition of hegemonically masculine characteristics such as taskmaster of angry boys. This in turn provided further evidence of the prioritisation of boys' negative social, emotional and behavioural needs. Although the affirmation of masculinity rituals, under the tutelage of male mentors is nothing new (see Lingard et al., 2009), this article contributes to knowledge specifically in its identification of the social, emotional and behavioural work performed by staff in school playgrounds being not only located in gender binary concepts but also in its grounding in hegemonic and heteronormative principles.

The application of gender binary views is highly apparent in the data gathered, in both the framing and enactment of the social, emotional and behavioural work, with boys seen as 'aggressive', 'violent', 'rutting stags' and girls perceived as 'bitchy', 'sly foxes'. The adoption of gender dualistic positions in schools, where stakeholders are viewed as simply male or female, and heterosexual, does have a grounding in the wider field of literature (see Connell, 2005; Garcia & Slesaransky-Poe, 2010), and here, in this study, we see its appearance in the social, emotional and behavioural work carried out by staff on school playgrounds. The privileging of hegemonic notions of masculinity in such work, though, was not simply about the adoption of gender dualistic positions, it was also heteronormative in its enactment. By focussing the schools' efforts on targeting boys' social, emotional and behavioural difficulties, mainly associated with violent, aggressive behaviours, priority was given to hegemonic displays of masculinity, in turn, subordinating and marginalising other masculinities and femininities. In positioning boys and girls according to gender stereotypical expectations, recognising mainly hegemonic displays of masculinity, and bearing in mind that hegemonic masculinity is exclusively heterosexual (Connell, 2005), the social, emotional and behavioural work taking place in play-based learning situations was framed also by an expectation of 'compulsory heterosexuality' (Francis, 2005, p.14). With the data shared here, and elsewhere (see Warin, 2019), demonstrating how some men promote gender-specific roles, based on heteronormative ideas in schools, there is a distinct need to return to positions that acknowledge that the relationship between gender and sexuality should be central considerations for those interested in the influence of educational activities, such as social, emotional and behavioural work, in children's identify formation (see Robinson, 2012). As heteronormative practices are seen to dominate both early childhood settings (Wilkinson & Pearson, 2009) and schools (Ferfolja, 2009) and are reproduced by them (Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2005), research to capture how gender and sexuality informs the social, emotional and behavioural work carried out in schools is needed, with the hope that its product may facilitate a move towards more inclusive practices.

A fundamental building block in the quest for inclusive practice as the cornerstone of future social, emotional and behavioural work is an acknowledgement that behaviours displayed by children are not bound by gender, nor should they be positioned by staff as traditionally

masculine or feminine. Instead, practitioners working in schools should embrace more gender flexible approaches to their social, emotional and behavioural work, including in play-based learning situations such as the playground, that focus on the development of characteristics, actions and skill sets, that are not confined by gender (Warin & Adriany, 2017). Although practitioners who understand the influence of gender stereotypical roles on both their practice and on the behaviours of children are more likely to intervene as a means of promoting inclusivity (see Chapman, 2016), there is still minimal attention and time focussing specifically on gender flexible ideas within teacher training programmes (Josephidou, 2020). Consequently, this article supports calls for a wider embrace of gender flexible pedagogy (see Warin, 2019), where gender awareness is central to the roles and responsibilities of staff working in schools, so that appropriate support is available for all children, regardless of sexuality and gender. Recognition of schools, as well as active engagement in reflexivity skills by their staff, specifically in terms of the gendered implications of their social, emotional and behavioural work with children, under the guise of gender sensitivity training (Warin, 2015), could provide a vehicle by which more gender flexible practices become embedded. The central focus of such training, it is proposed, is work that identifies, 'confront(s) and disrupt(s) gendered performances' (Warin & Adriany, 2017, p. 384) in one's own and others' practice, and in the behaviours displayed by children. The centralisation of such gender aware and critical practice in schools, it is argued, will allow school stakeholders to feel less restricted by traditional gendered expectations. This in turn may facilitate the likelihood of inclusivity in the social, emotional and behavioural work carried out by practitioners, and in the social and emotional behaviours of the children.

CONCLUSION

The data gathered as part of this study contributes to knowledge in its revelation of how the social, emotional and behavioural work taking place within schools, on the playground, by the range of practitioners within them, was positioned, enacted and informed by gendered narratives. The prioritisation, by the staff member participants, of physically aggressive playground behaviours of boys, over girls' indirect forms of aggression, captured an approach to social, emotional and behavioural work grounded in both patriarchal dividend (Connell, 1996) and sacrificial girls (Charlton et al., 2007) principles. Although such principles have an established evidence base across educational platforms, this article contributes new knowledge in their application to playground behaviours specifically, and the support offered to boys and girls based on the social and emotional difficulties they display in this space. Furthermore, the data also demonstrated how gender binary views frame the activities and behaviours performed on the schoolyard by boys and girls and, in doing so, showcased an often passive, unproblematic adherence, by staff, to gender scripts (Burn & Pratt-Adams, 2015) to guide their social, emotional and behavioural work. As this article offers affirmation for those pondering on the potential for emotional pedagogy to inculcate gender binary positions in schools (Evans, 2017), in its revelation of such practices within the social, emotional and behavioural work taking place on the playground, school-based practitioners are encouraged to adopt more gender flexible qualities as part of the work they do.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The author declares no conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

ETHICS STATEMENT

Ethical approval was granted from the researcher's host University ethics committee and all ethical considerations are explored in detail in the main article.

PATIENT CONSENT STATEMENT

Informed consent was obtained from study participants as is detailed in the main article.

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