

**‘Absent fathers’, and children’s social and emotional
learning: an exploration of the perceptions of ‘positive male
role models’ in the primary school sector**

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the testimonies of three male primary school staff members who utilised social and emotional learning (SEL) in their everyday practice within their respective schools. The data, collected through individual interviews, illustrates how these three men interpreted SEL, and their role in the development of children’s social, emotional and behavioural (SEB) skills, in response to their perceptions of pupils’ home-life. In particular, the sample identified the children’s fathers’ perceived ability/inability as a main cause of pupils’ SEB deficiencies. Consequently, the three male staff members maintained that in order to advocate and encourage alternative, appropriate behaviours, they should act as ‘replacement fathers’ and become ‘role models’. The findings contribute to existing debates relating to the notion of ‘positive male role models’ in primary schools and the propensity for staff to engage in parental blame. The implications of these findings are discussed, and suggestions that call for a more democratic and cooperative exchange of knowledge between parents and teachers are made.

Keywords: Absent fathers; Children’s social, emotional learning; Positive male role models;
Primary school sector

Introduction

The role of education to explicitly target children's social, emotional and behavioural (SEB) skills has intensified over the past decade. The Children's Act (2004) and subsequent 'Every Child Matters: Change for Children' (2004) document heralded the beginning of a new approach, one that focussed on improving the well-being of children in a range of institutions, including schools. Although interest in social and emotional issues, at the time, was nothing new (Weare 2007), a spate of publications both nationally and internationally (see Palmer 2006; Alexander and Hargreaves 2007; Layard and Dunn 2009; UNICEF 2007; 2011) demonstrated concern pertaining to the social and emotional ill-health of children in the UK. In response, a number of educational initiatives, including social and emotional learning (SEL) schemes, were introduced as a means of improving children's SEB skills across England and Wales (DfES, 2005). These curriculum-based resources, that utilise whole-school work such as classroom based lessons and assemblies; small group-work sessions for children deemed to require the extra social and emotional support; and intervention with individual children (Humphrey, Kalambouka, Bolton, Lendrum, Wigelsworth, Lennie and Farrel, 2008), were primarily aimed at developing all children's social, emotional and behavioural skills by enhancing levels of emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1995).

With greater attention being given to social and emotional issues in education (Weare 2007), the roles and skills expected of school staff members shifted from one of 'educator' toward one of 'educarer' (Osgood, 2005), incorporating a renewed emphasis on pastoral support and care. Coinciding with this shift, came a propensity for UK governments to blame parents for children's lack of social and emotional skills (Palmer, 2009; Bell, 2014), with specific

condemnation being reserved for absent fathers, who were regularly held responsible for a range of society's ills, including the anti-social behaviour of children (Cameron, 2011; Centre for Social Justice, 2013). Indeed, the view that father absence has negative consequences for children's behaviour and social and emotional development has continued to receive empirical support in the UK (see Flouri, Narayan and Midouhas, 2015), with some (see Benyon, 2002; Jones, 2008) maintaining that schools should employ more men as a means of providing a 'stable male role model' or 'replacement father' (Skelton, 2002) to those children without a father home. It is to these calls that this paper now turns, as understanding how male staff members interpret and use SEL is vital in determining not only how such men negotiate the expectations placed upon them and outlined above, but also how children's social, emotional and behavioural skills are being targeted in schools, both of which have proved difficult to attain (see Cushman, 2005; Banerjee, 2010).

In this paper, we present the accounts of three male primary school staff members who utilised SEL in their individual roles within their respective schools. The views of these men, gathered during individual interviews, showed that their interpretation of SEL was often influenced by perceptions of pupils' home-life, and in particular the fathers' perceived ability /inability to develop their children's social, emotional and behavioural skills. We focus on these views and illustrate how the three male staff members blamed 'absent' or 'inadequate' fathers for children's lack of SEB skills. Their role in the delivery of SEL will be discussed, along with notions of them serving as a 'replacement father' figure (Skelton, 2002) to advocate and encourage alternative behaviours.

The neo-liberal movement, which rests upon the notions of individuality and self-responsibility (Tame, 1991; Muncie, 1999), has underpinned the political concerns of recent governments in the UK. In line with the priorities of this ideology, the then New Labour government emphasised parental responsibility and the family as key sites in the prevention of anti-social behaviour (Drakeford and McCarthy, 2000; Goldson and Jamieson, 2002; Jamieson, 2005). Those parents failing to subscribe to notions of self-responsibility and moral obligation, or those not seen as part of a ‘traditional family’, were often scapegoated for society’s ills, with Jack Straw, the UK Home Secretary under New Labour, claiming that “too often” parents do not “face up” to their responsibilities (Straw and Michael, 1996).

Under the Conservative-led coalition government, the tendency to attribute blame to parents for young people’s anti-social behaviours continued (Bell, 2014). A series of riots, witnessed in England in early August 2011, saw widespread disturbances within London and other cities in the Midlands, the North West and elsewhere in the country. In response, the Prime Minister, David Cameron, stated that pockets of society were not just “broken” but “sick”. Pointing to an apparent breakdown in traditional family structures, typified through a lack of parental responsibility, Mr. Cameron, in September 2011, argued that the rioting was linked to selfishness, irresponsibility and “children without fathers”. Continuing his denunciation, the Prime Minister emphasised the importance of the nuclear family by maintaining that the rioting offenders were “filled up with rage and anger” as it was now “normal” for some “young men to grow up without a male role model” and father figure.

A report published by the Centre for Social Justice (CJS), in June 2013, identified how families with ‘absent fathers’ are having ‘devastating effects’ on the life chances of children (CJS, 2013). Cristian Guy, director for the think-tank, contends that for some children growing up in the poorest parts of the UK, men are often absent in the home and classroom, and that these ‘men deserts’ are an ignored form deprivation, damaging to children’s social and mental development. Such belief has renewed public discourse which favours more men in education, particularly in the primary sector, where it is argued that children are disadvantaged as a result of this lack of a male presence (Jones, 2007).

The ‘need’ for more males in schools

A central argument for the greater recruitment and participation of male teachers in the primary sector focuses on the educational benefits for children (Moss, 2000; Dee, 2007). Blount (1999) and Skelton (2003, p. 195) argue that efforts to increase the number of male teachers have been designed to ‘counteract the feminisation of primary schooling’. As staff in the sector are predominantly female (Harris and Barnes, 2009), Griffiths (2006) describes how it is perceived that they will act in stereotypically feminine ways, and that their practice and delivery of the curriculum, teaching and management strategies, assessment regimes, and expectations will favour girls as opposed to boys. Indeed, OFSTED (2008) has highlighted how many schools continue to promote learning activities and adopt teaching styles which are considered to be better suited to girls. These quiet, verbal, artistic and passive activities have been found to alienate and ‘turn off’ boys (Biddulph, 1995), leading to disaffection toward schooling (Burn,

2002; Swann, 2013), resulting in poor engagement, academic underachievement and behavioural difficulties.

It is suggested that by bringing more men into schools the ‘soft pedagogical practices’ of women (Odih, 2002, p. 91) will be complemented with alternative forms of provision which incorporate natural, ‘hands on’ activities that require rigour and movement (Mulholland and Hansen, 2003). In support, McPhee (2007) maintains that men are able to mould both lesson content and teaching materials so that they align more with boys’ interests and preferences. A shared consensus deems that this approach will help to offer boys a more balanced education as they begin to appreciate that women and men behave, operate, and interact differently as teachers with children of differing genders (Pilburn, Nelson, Carburn and West, 2011; Gurain, Stevens, Henley and Trueman, 2011). It is, however, interesting to note Ashley (2001), who argues that what motivates and interests boys is actually what motivates and interests *all* children. This brings into question the efficacy of pedagogical approaches that address presumed gender differences, particularly as Younger, Warrington and McLellan (2005) identify the problems associated with treating boys and girls as undifferentiated entities in the classroom, with pre-defined interests. Furthermore, Francis (2008) opposes this pedagogical mind-set, maintaining that it is absurd to expect male teachers to teach in uniform ways based on their ‘maleness’.

Male teachers as ‘replacement fathers’

In 2007, the UK-based Office for National Statistics (ONS) reported that children in Britain were three times more likely to live in one-parent households than in 1972; in 2012 it was claimed that

92% of lone parents with dependent children were mothers (ONS, 2012) and in 2013 the CJS claimed that around one million children would grow up with no contact with their father (CJS, 2013). The nuclear family is valorised by the suggestion that boys who do not have fathers in their lives are likely to be experiencing a deficient upbringing as opposed to those whose fathers are present (Golombok, 2000). This is supported by controversial claims that single mothers do not rear their sons in appropriate ways (Slattery, 2003), which exacerbate gender debates about parenting competencies by presenting strong and contentious perceptions of women ‘as the problem’ and ‘men as the solution’ (Smedley, 1998, p. 158). Through the employment of more men in schools it is, thus, argued that those children, who come from homes where fathers are absent, will have greater access to a ‘stable male’ (Jones, 2008), or a substitute/surrogate ‘dad’ who can relate better to pupils, support their development, model positive behaviour, and provide the required level of stability and consistency which, in turn, will result in a rise in standards of academic attainment and behaviour (Beynon, 2002).

Although this notion of the male teacher acting as a ‘replacement father’ (Skelton, 2002) evolves from, and is supported by, theoretical claims that children develop sexual identity by identifying with the same-sex parent (Segal 1990; Bos and Sandfort, 2010), opposition has been offered. Ashley and Lee (2003), for example, argue that the discourse of parenting is clearly different to the discourse of caring in primary schools, whilst Smith (2004) questions if teachers can replicate the role of parents in the classroom. Furthermore, Cushman (2005) maintains that young, single male teachers found being a ‘father substitute’ was inconceivable, particularly as they were expected to model characteristics and behaviours which were unspecified. Whilst the concept of male teachers as ‘replacement fathers’ has been critiqued, the approach has been

advocated by both OFSTED (2008) and Ivens (2008) who claim that schools that provide such staff will help boys' development and challenge those who are currently growing up with poor attitudes. In this paper, we contribute to these on-going debates by sharing the views of three male primary school staff members who, in their perceptions and uses of SEL, identified with the concepts introduced above. The male staff members consistently cited 'inadequate' or 'absent fathers' as a cause for children's lack of SEB skills and, in response, identified their engagement with SEL as a vehicle to act as a 'replacement father' (Skelton 2002).

The empirical study

This paper utilises data collected from a large research study that aimed to investigate how primary school staff members understood and made use of SEL, a scheme concerned with improving personal relationships, helping individuals to understand their own emotions and those of others and creating an awareness of appropriate response to the emotions of others (Weare, 2007). In a review of SEL initiatives across many countries, Cohen and Sandy (2007) assert that teaching children to self-reflect, be self-aware, be empathetic, control impulses, and handle relationships are essential if such schemes are to develop children's SEB skills. Numerous authors, including Elias (2000), Gadre (2004) and Kroeger, Schultz and Newsom (2007), have highlighted the benefits of SEL in schools, citing improvements in children's anger management strategies, social skills and ability to resolve conflict as justification for their claims. Although subsequent studies of such initiatives in the UK have identified favourable outcomes (see Hallam, Rhamie and Shaw, 2006; Humphrey et al., 2008; Banerjee 2010), few have captured how SEL schemes are being interpreted or used by schools, with those that have

indicating how they are implemented and understood in ‘very different ways’ (Banerjee 2010, p. 8), by school staff members. Whilst the aim of the study set out to explore how primary school staff members were making sense of SEL in general, an unanticipated finding related to the small sample of male staff who understood and discussed their role in the delivery of SEL as a ‘replacement father’ figure (Skelton, 2002). This finding serves as the focus for the remainder of the paper.

Methodological approach

In the main study, data were collected across three phases of investigation, from a range of primary school staff members including head teachers, teachers, teaching assistants, welfare staff and other support staff. A mixed methods empirical investigation, combining both quantitative and qualitative strategies, was employed to explore how SEL was being interpreted and used by schools and staff, and prior to the collection of data, all the inventories utilised were piloted. Completed by 402 staff members across 38 primary schools located in a town in Northern England, phase one consisted of a 29-item questionnaire that employed a combination of both Likert-scale and open-ended forms of response; as such, both quantitative and qualitative data was gathered at this point. In phase two, 10 focus group interviews, comprising of a total of 44 staff members were carried out across four case study schools, whilst in phase three, qualitative data was collected using individual, semi-structured interviews with 24 staff members across the four schools. Whilst phase one gathered both quantitative and qualitative data, phases two and three focussed solely on the qualitative experiences of the sample and these provide the catalyst for the findings to be explored. In this paper we draw on data taken from the individual, semi-

structured interview phase of the study only (phase three), as the small sample of male practitioners who took part in the research were limited to this specific phase. Throughout the research process, all the ethical procedures outlined by the British Educational Research Association (2011) were adhered to.

The three male staff members

As mentioned, in the individual semi-structured interview phase of the main study, qualitative data was retrieved from 24 primary school staff members, of which only three were men and in this paper we focus on the data retrieved from these three male staff members. Personal details pertaining to each staff member, such as their age and ethnicity, were not sought in order to achieve a degree of anonymity. However, to contextualise the findings discussed in the following sections of the paper, some brief details of the sample whose data is reported are now included. To ensure confidentiality and anonymity, the names utilised in this paper are allocated pseudonyms:

Stanley is a Head Teacher at a larger than average primary school located in an area of social disadvantage.

Fred is a Key Stage Two teacher, teaching children aged ten and eleven, at a small primary school which draws pupils from a mixed catchment area.

Bob is a Learning Mentor working in a large primary school located in an urban area with high levels of social and economic disadvantage. Bob's main role is to manage the pastoral support

and care available to the children within the school. As well as supporting individual students with varying social, emotional and behavioural needs, Bob also engages in SEL-based group work and one to one support for individual pupils.

Research findings: Male staff members' perceptions of SEL

When discussing children's SEB skill development, all three male staff members consistently cited 'inadequate' or 'absent fathers' as a chief variable when pupils were deemed to lack in this area. In response, and again consistent in their views, these men maintained that by engaging with SEL they could act as a 'replacement father' figure and encourage behaviours considered appropriate to them. Whilst the behaviours valued and endorsed by these staff members varied, all three men maintained that their position as a 'positive role model' was essential for children's SEB skill development. In this section we explore these views and illustrate how the male staff members engaged with SEL in response to their pre-conceived perceptions of the children's home-lives, where the notion of fatherhood was particularly pertinent.

SEL as a response to absent/inadequate fathers

As has already been alluded to, all three male staff members expressed concerns relating to the absence of fathers in the home. The sample noted 'absent fathers' as a main cause of pupils' SEB problems, and, in turn, identified SEL as a means of combatting the inappropriate behaviours deemed to be a product of such issues. Bob believed that SEL was being used as most "children don't have their dads around", whilst Fred maintained such schemes were utilised to "combat

broken marriages” as, to him, “absent fathers are definitely the problem”. Extending this emphasis on fatherhood and its links to SEB problems, Fred felt that, as “single mums...don’t have time ... to talk, and to discuss with children what is right and wrong”, SEL can be used to combat the result of father absenteeism in the home by facilitating children’s SEB development at school; whilst Bob claimed that being a “school in a deprived area”, with fathers who experience a variety social issues such as “unemployment, drugs, alcohol (and) abuse”, justifies the employment of the scheme.

Stanley, a head teacher at a school where, in his own words, SEL was “embedded” and viewed as “crucial” and “essential”, spoke at length about his endorsement of this form of learning. Detailing his decision to implement SEL, and in keeping with the concerns expressed by Fred and Bob, Stanley claimed that a “rapidly growing percentage” of the “three and four year old children” entering his school had “lower and lower emotional and social skills levels to start with.” When asked why this was the case, Stanley replied:

Stanley:

I think that is quite easily answered, because the parent of that child, and I use the singular, because that’s the real issue...A lot of these children have no sound male role model in their family, and the individual parent, a lot of them are very caring, but totally lacking on appropriate parenting skills.

Additionally, and later on in our conversation, Stanley spoke about his belief that “poor parenting”, most prominently performed “where....inadequate dads are around”, was often the cause of the many SEB difficulties exhibited by the children attending his school. In relation to these points, he claimed that inappropriate parenting was typified through the endorsement of violent acts, maintaining that “these inadequate dads” actively encourage their children “to hit” other pupils if disagreement occurs. In response, and in acknowledgement of a “conflict between what is taught at home and what is taught in school”, Stanley hoped to be an “emotionally literate adult and a positive male role model” so that the children can witness “a mature way to behave.” As Stanley alluded to in his interview, the approaches to SEB skill development of school and home did not always align. Where there was the absence of a “positive male role model” in the home, the schools, and in particular the male staff members, assumed this position and in the next section we explore this finding further.

SEB skill development by ‘positive role models’

In order to combat behaviours deemed to be promoted in the home, and produced by inadequate or absent fathers, the men in this study utilised SEL to encourage alternative behaviours considered appropriate and acceptable to them. Fred, for example, felt “that through SEL, we ... have the right to show children that fighting is not the way”, believing it to be “really important” to act as “a good role model.” Echoing Stanley’s belief that inadequate fathers encourage aggressive responses to conflict resolution situations, Fred stated that “society doesn’t like that” and as a means of combatting such behaviours he “needs” to “be a good role model” so that the children may become “good citizens.”

This “need” to act as a “positive role model” was apparent for all three of the male staff members interviewed. Fred’s assertion that staff “must be a good role model” in order to create an environment where children become “good citizens” was evident in the views expressed by both Stanley and Bob. Stanley, for example, emphasised his “need to be a positive role model” which, to him was demonstrated by an ability to “communicate effectively “ and “to develop the child in terms of social and emotional aspects of life” by being “an emotionally literate person”, whilst for Bob, his “need to be a positive male role model” for “boys with anger issues” related mainly “to showing them how to respond appropriately” to emotional problems.

What is striking from the views of the three men was their tendency to stress the “need” to act as a “positive role model”, due to the belief that a “positive male role model” was often lacking in the children’s home-lives. By assuming this position in school, and by filling this perceived void in the children’s lives, these men acted as a ‘replacement father’ figure for those pupils exhibiting inappropriate behaviours, deemed a product of absent/inadequate fathers. As has been illustrated in the views offered by Stanley and Bob above, the SEB skills prioritised by each man differed, and these will be explored further in the next section.

Prioritising specific SEB skills

The three male staff members identified a range of behaviours they felt important for children’s SEB skill development, and the men’s role in engaging with SEL varied as a consequence of

these views. Stanley, for example, maintained that “social and emotional learning is how I should behave with a child, how I should communicate with a child, how I should encourage a child to develop the basic social and emotional skills”. Taking a holistic approach to SEL, Stanley prioritised the development of children’s “communication” and “basic social and emotional skills”. Similarly, Fred also identified SEB skills linked to communication as integral in his engagement with SEL, declaring that “many children don’t have anybody to talk to at home, whereas SEL at school is brilliant, because then the child has somebody to talk to.” For Fred, SEL provides children with the opportunity “to think about how they can do things differently,...how they speak to other people,...the vocabulary used to describe their feelings,” clarifying how ultimately the scheme helps children to “express themselves.” Fred’s interpretation and use of SEL as a vehicle to develop communication skills is captured well in the extract below:

Fred:

SEL is about getting the children to talk to each other and not at each other; to listen more; to take people’s opinions and value them; to listen to what they’ve got to say not just in class but outside as well; to take on board what they’ve said and if they don’t agree then say why, but to do it in a nice way; talking without using violence, without shouting, without talking at somebody.

Unlike Stanley and Fred, who refrained from associating SEL to the pupils' gender, Bob maintained that his role in engaging with SEL related most prominently to being a "father figure", for boys specifically. In relation to SEB skill development, Bob prioritised "the need for strong boundaries" for boys, and identified gender as crucial in the production of this outcome. In relation to this point, Bob insisted that female staff do not "have the patience for some boys that have anger issues" meaning they "struggle" to manage their behaviour. Arguing that female staff "try to mother" these pupils, Bob continued by claiming that:

Bob: *Sometimes the children don't need mothering, they just need strong boundaries, a father figure ... I'll say to the children: 'If you pass the boundary this is what's going to happen', and sometimes I've seen the female staff mothering them and they don't need that, they need boundaries.*

Later in the interview, Bob re-affirmed his gender as an important element of his engagement with SEL. Utilising the arena of sport, identified by Skelton (2010) as crucial in 'the making of men' (Mac an Ghaill, 1994), in the reproduction of traditional hegemonic notions of masculinity (Connell, 2010), and as a vehicle to act as a "male role model for the boys", Bob claimed "the main reason" he works with boys with behavioural issues was because he is "outside all the time" engaging the pupils in "sports". Consequently, Bob believed he is best positioned to

provide “strong boundaries” and to be a “father figure” for these boys as, in his words, “the female staff are not prepared...to do that.”

As is illustrated in the excerpts offered by the three male staff members, whilst they largely agreed that SEL was useful in combatting inappropriate pupil behaviour regarded as a product of ‘absent/inadequate fathers’, there was a degree of discrepancy relating to the types of SEB skills each man felt they needed to ‘role model’. In the next section of this paper we discuss these disparities as a means to contributing to existing debates relating to the notion of ‘positive male role models’ in schools.

Discussion

School settings are recognised as salient sites where masculinities are formed and where boys learn the construction of gender roles (Connell, 1989; Paechter, 2006), and it is believed that male teachers are in a strategic and powerful position to influence the process of masculinity construction. This, it is claimed, is because what male teachers say and do influences the type of masculinity deemed as hegemonic in school, meaning these men have a specific responsibility and opportunity (Kessler, Ashenden, Connell and Dowsett, 1985). Bob’s endorsement of traditional notions of gender based behaviours and his belief that he is a “positive male role model” are in keeping with Clare’s (2005) view of ‘doing gender’, and concepts of gender performativity (see Halberstam, 1998), where male bodies ‘do boy’ and female bodies ‘do girl’ (Butler, 1990). Furthermore, they exemplify how heterosexuality is a normalised part of the

education sector (Gray, 2011), illustrating how heteronormative practices not only dominate schools (DePalma and Atkinson, 2009; Ferfolja, 2009), but are reproduced by them (Martino and Pallotta-Chiarolli 2005).

There is clear reference, in Bob's views, to activities which are considered to be traditionally masculine, such as sports and competitiveness (Connell, 1995; 2002), and his utilisation of the position of a "positive male role model" centres on constructing and modelling of hegemonic forms of masculinity. As hegemonic masculinity is exclusively heterosexual (Connell 2005), Bob's use of 'symbolic power' (Bourdieu, 1991) to cultivate 'bodies into discrete sexes with 'natural'...heterosexual dispositions' (Butler, 1988, p. 524) is further evidence of heteronormative practice and reproduction within schools. Although it has been suggested that professionals should try to make sense of their role in many ways (Owen, 2003), Bob's enactment of a 'male role model' is highly informed by 'entrenched stereotypical attitudes' (Skelton, 1991, p. 283), social expectations and public discourse which advocates that the 'right kind of role model' should exhibit strong characteristics of conventional hegemonic notions of masculinity (Connell, 2002) and promote these in their male pupils.

Whilst this practice of the nurturing of men by men has received some support (see Jones, 2006), due to an ill-informed belief that women are unable to offer such provision as it means rejecting what it is 'to be female' (Thornton, 1999), numerous critiques have been offered. Lingard and Douglas (1999) and Jones (2008), for example, maintain that such an approach could create an influx of conservative and uncritical men who may simply reinforce and embed more traditional

patterns of gender relations that are strongly heterosexual and macho, and orientated around nuclear families and primarily female carers (Wadsworth, 2002).

Unlike Bob, who placed emphasis on being a positive ‘male’ role model and exhibited behaviours associated with hegemonic notions of masculinity, both Stanley and Fred adopted the position of a ‘role model who is male’, modelling behaviours deemed important to them. Notions of care, compassion and nurture (Farquhar, 1997), captured in Stanley’s and Fred’s thinking, give resonance to traits that are traditionally associated with femininity (MacDougall, 1997; Noddings, 2001). Whilst the idea of nurturing is largely construed by public perception as being attributed to ‘women’s work’ (King, 1998), it is evident in Stanley’s and Fred’s transcripts that concepts of the term ‘male role model’ need to acknowledge the practices of ‘a nurturer providing educational services’ (Allen, 2000, p. 138). Furthermore, neither Stanley nor Fred acknowledged gender when speaking about their position, but instead exemplified Salisbury and Jackson’s (1996) notion of a role model, by displaying a range of masculinities for children. By placing emphasis on behaviours, activities and qualities that are perceived as feminine, such as listening and kindness (Balchin, 2002), Stanley and Fred displayed traits associated with Jones’ (2007, p. 190) notion of the ‘millennium man’, who ‘...is constructed...by partial discourses of traditional masculinity, fused with more progressive discourses...[of] sensitiv[ity] and caring’.

In recent years there has been a gradual shift towards a more ‘holistic approach’ (Cushman, 2005) to schooling, where men incorporate both masculine and feminine traits in an attempt to ensure that inter and intra personal skills, compassion and sensitivity are strong features of their

practice. The perceived ‘soft’ pedagogical approach of women in schools (Odih, 2002), typified by behaviours such as empathy, patience, flexibility, kindness, tolerance, compassion, affection and gentleness (Balchin, 2002), were acknowledged as worthy by both Stanley and Fred. Whilst male teachers may sometimes feel restricted in displaying such behaviours (see Harris and Barnes, 2009), in order to challenge homophobic and paedophilic ‘assumptions’ (Robinson, 2002) by portraying an image of being ‘properly masculine’, both Stanley and Fred illuminate Hutchings, Carrington, Skelton, Read and Hall’s (2007) view that men who work with children have an important role in offering less stereotyped images.

The three men in this study have identified a variety of behaviours they feel are essential in order to be viewed as a positive role model, such as those associated with the modelling of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1995; 2002), counter-hegemonic behaviours (Hutchings et al. 2007), being a good educator (Carrington and Skelton, 2003) and a good person (Ashley, 2001). For Bob, who emphasised his position as a “positive male role model”, the promotion of conventional hegemonic notions of masculinity amongst his male pupils was integral to his role, whilst for Stanley and Fred, who adopted the position of ‘role models who are male’, modelling behaviours deemed essential to them, such as listening and empathy, were more important. Clearly, these disparities highlight the complexities of defining the term ‘role model’, as different ways of interpreting the word ‘behaviour’ determines the kinds of behaviours the role model is meant to display.

Perhaps a more beneficial way of conceptualising the notion of a ‘role model’ is to place less emphasis on gender and more on the professional’s pedagogic and interpersonal skills that are vital in the engagement of children as learners. Carrington, Francis, Hutchings, Skelton, Read and Hall (2007), for example, found that the gender of the teacher had little bearing on the children’s level of engagement or the perceived quality of their classroom experiences, whilst earlier work by Lahelma (2000) found that girls and boys alike value qualities deemed not to be specifically female or male. Additionally, Ashley (2002) asserts that children appreciate characteristics which could be universally emulated by both a male and female teacher, namely being reasonably strict, fair, having a sense of humour, being able to explain things well, and being able to help the child with their work, reinforcing the view that the gender of the teacher is largely immaterial. As such, it is feasible to suggest that all teachers, regardless of their gender, have the capacity to be a ‘role model’, as good primary teachers display qualities that are largely androgynous (Cushman, 2005).

Conclusion and future directions

Whilst there was a degree of variability between the three staff members when articulating their perceptions of a role model, there was commonality in their attribution of blame to the children’s parents as a cause of their apparent SEB deficiencies. By blaming ‘absent fathers’, the three men in this study created a parental deficit, and in turn positioned a specific group of parent – single mothers – as failing. This working representation of ‘women as the problem’ and ‘men as the solution’ (Smedley, 1998, p.158) exemplifies how parenting is no longer a private but a public issue (Vincent, Braun and Ball, 2008) and is further evidence of a ‘neo-liberal agenda’ that

targets disadvantaged families (Broadhurst, Mason and Grover, 2007; Vincent et al., 2008). Stanley, Fred and Bob did not take heed of Broadhurst's (2009) advice that parenting should be understood in the context of neighbourhood, housing and household composition, and failed to acknowledge the range of constraints, such as poverty, that make parenting difficult (Goldson and Jamieson 2002; Gillies 2005). This lack of contextual understanding, and their propensity to label fault at 'absent fathers' and 'single mothers', illustrates how professionals in schools are no longer oppressed by, but are agents of, neo-liberalism, as they are formed out of the principles of competition, self-responsibility and individuality that makes them accountable for not only their performance but for those others (Ball and Olmedo, 2013), which in turn facilitates their attribution of blame to other parties.

Wood and Warin (2014) have suggested that professionals can move away from this climate of blame, individuality and self-responsibility via the act of mutual reach, which calls for a more cooperative and democratic exchange between teachers and parents (Warin, 2009), as this may reduce the likelihood of school staff communicating superior attitudes to parents which often reinforces the barriers between school and home (Crozier, 1997). Whilst such an approach is undoubtedly worthwhile at a whole-school level (see Weare, 2007), we maintain that more needs to be done by the individual professionals operating within schools. Recently, work by Ball and Olmedo (2013) and Ball (2015) demonstrates how educators and school professionals can resist and refuse the effects of neo-liberalism upon their practice and as it occurs within their environment. Pointing to various 'sites' where neo-liberalism unfolds in schools, such as school league tables which exacerbate 'competitiveness', Ball (2015) argues that a refusal to engage with such processes is an effective demonstration of resisting the imposition of neo-liberalism

upon practice. Thus, for Bob, Fred and Stanley, a refusal to engage with actions that typify neo-liberal thought, such as individuality and self-responsibility (Lazzarato, 2009), may alleviate their urge to blame vulnerable groups of parents for children's lack of SEB skills. Ball's (2015) call for 'subjectivity as a site of struggle' in the refusal and rejection of neo-liberalism illustrates how school staff can resist the imposition of this ideology upon their practice. By beginning this struggle 'on their own terrain and on the basis of their proper activity' (Deleuze and Foucault, 1977, p. 216), school staff are well positioned to challenge the propensity to blame others for pupils' misbehaviour, and by engaging in activities of neo-liberal resistance and refusal they may become role models worthy of children's attention.

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