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Gendering Emotions Work in Primary Schools: “Effortless” or “Important”?

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ABSTRACT

Emotions work, such as relational pedagogical approaches to teaching, and more targeted interventions designed to enhance children’s social and emotional skills, known as competence promotion approaches, are now a central aspect of primary schooling. Yet, although evidence is forthcoming in terms of the content, focus, and effectiveness of some aspects of this work, research investigating the explicit teaching of social and emotional skills has largely remained “gender blind.” This article, drawing on interview and focus group data gathered from primary school staff members engaged in emotions work, fills this void in the research by demonstrating how gendered narratives inform not only the roles and responsibilities of staff undertaking this type of work but also the value placed upon it. The findings show how gender dualistic positions were adopted by school staff, with the emotions work performed by women aligned with the roles of a mother, nurturer, and caregiver and thus deemed as “effortless,” whereas men mainly performed the role of “disciplinarian” and deemed such work as “important” in their position as a male role model. The implications of such gendering of emotions work in primary schools are discussed, and recommendations for future practice are identified.

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There has been a boom, in recent years, in research activity focusing on the development of children’s social and emotional skills in schools. This “emotions work” involves schemes associated with social and emotional learning (see Wigelsworth et al., 2023), Nurture Groups (see Bennett, 2015), and more general relational and emotional pedagogical approaches (see Reeves & Le Mare, 2017) to teaching. However, due to a lack of research that explores how “gendering processes” affect and are affected by the “performance of emotionality,” calls have been made to examine such emotions work in schools in a gender critical way (see Evans, 2017).

In heed of such calls, this article focuses on data derived from a research study that examined the interpretation, use, and enactment of emotions work taking place across four schools, through a “gendered” lens. It focuses on a range of gendered narratives, drawn upon by staff to position their own roles and responsibilities when undertaking emotions work. In particular, it shows how some staff equate emotions work to their role as a mother, and in turn identified such work as natural and effortless. For some male staff members, on the other hand, more importance was attributed to their adoption of the position of a “male role model” to nurture the behaviors of boys they identified as unruly. Consequently, the value attributed to emotions work was highly gendered, as was the belief in the levels of competence and capacity to perform such work.

Although there were instances where these gendered orthodoxies were disrupted, the data gathered largely demonstrated the adoption, by primary school staff, of a dualistic approach in positioning

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gender within their emotions work. Before focusing on these findings, and in the next section, I explore the variety of emotions work that have been and are taking place in schools, ponder on their role, and query if research that has aimed to evaluate such work has done so in a gender critical or gender blind way. After providing details of the empirical work that provided the basis for the article, I then present the research findings, locate and discuss their contribution to knowledge, and offer recommendations for future practice that stem from them.

Conceptual framework

Emotions in teaching and learning

The acknowledgment, integration, and use of emotions within teaching takes many forms and has a long history. At any given time, school staff members continuously engage in “emotional labor” (Hochschild, 1983) by managing their emotions within their many and varied daily interactions with colleagues, parents, and children, as a means of conforming to their own work role requirements. Although this “emotional labor” may manifest in a variety of ways, through surface acting, deep acting, or genuine expression (Diefendorff et al., 2005), what is clear is that the use and expression of emotion as a teaching aid continues to be important for educators of primary school-age children (see de Ruiter et al., 2021). What is less clear, however, is how gender may influence such practices, with minimal attention in the field given to the gendered nature of this form of emotions work.

Stemming from a view of education, grounded in an “ethic of care” (Noddings, 2002), where its purpose should be focused on cultivating caring students and educators through the prioritization of caring topics, relational pedagogic approaches are not only important in promoting and sustaining schools that value such a stance but are also central to the social and emotional development of the pupils within them (Reeves & Le Mare, 2017). As “caring relationships” provide a strong backdrop for positive development (Noddings, 2005), staff working with children under the principles of an “ethic of care” in schools should strive to move away from prioritizing “self” to “others,” so that their work is focused on attending and responding to the students’ emotional needs, and to then tailor the support they offer as a consequence (Noddings, 2012). Although research, as captured by Reeves and Le Mare (2017) and Noddings (2012), demonstrates the importance of “ethics of care” in educational settings, there has been a lack of awareness about the influence of gender in the exploration of these principles specifically.

The basis for relational pedagogy lies in the interpersonal skills of the adult to adequately understand, interpret, and respond to the children’s emotional cues; therefore, teachers who prioritize the quality of their daily interactions with students are best positioned to cultivate classroom environments that not only promote academic success but also provide social and emotional nourishment for the children (Sabol & Pianta, 2012). To engage in “emotional work of the highest calibre” (Elfer et al., 2003, p. 27), practitioners must not only harness their own feelings and emotions (Recchia et al., 2018), but also strive to employ “professional love” at all times, which requires practitioners to invest in emotional intimacy in their relationships with children so that they are reciprocal, to master emotional resilience, prioritize children’s needs, and be fundamentally compelled to act for their good (Page, 2018). Although more gender critical work in this field is needed, the products of such “professional love” are practitioners who are self-aware and available to children, which helps in building authentic, reciprocal, and enduring relationships, with emotions at their core (Page, 2018). Yet, although such concepts at face value seem central to teaching, they have not only been “feared and overlooked” (Warren, 2021, p. 565), but also explicitly de-valued in neo-liberal education systems that value rationalism, accountability, and the “terrors of performativity” (Ball, 2010) as pertinent to current conceptualizations of teacher professionalism, over skills such as “emotionality,” “care,” and “professional love” (Page, 2018).

Although debates continue regarding the inclusion of emotionality as a key component of teacher professionalism (see Osgood, 2010), there is little debate regarding the gendered nature of early

childhood education and care (ECEC), with this sector long being viewed as “women’s work.” Captured by the term “educare,” it is posited that the perceived primary function of the work at this level for female teachers and support staff is to care for the children (Osgood, 2005). In relation to emotions, there is a growing body of evidence to suggest that female practitioners, specifically, are encouraged to be committed to emotional labor practices (Osgood, 2012). Gendered expectations serve as socializing agents for women, encouraging them to partake in the maternal caring roles within their day-to-day work, which, in turn, impacts, re-affirms, and conflates their professional and personal identities as a carer and mother (Giddens, 2001).

The blurring of roles expected of a teacher and of a mother has an established evidence base (see Acker, 1995; Ailwood, 2007). Work regarding “sex-role spill-over” (Gutek & Cohen, 1987), which purports that an apparent carryover of traditional notions of gender-based roles from the home into the work setting is useful in understanding how the values of care and nurturance, which are central to emotional and relational pedagogy, are viewed, in Acker’s (1995, p. 19) terms, as “non-work” associated with the notion of women doing “natural,” quasi-maternal “caring.” The close alignment of female teachers engaging in emotional pedagogy with maternal caring roles re-affirms a personal identity as, primarily, a mother and carer (Duncan, 2005; Giddens, 2001), with the “naturalness” (Osgood, 2005, p. 285) of the work they perform used as justification for the low pay and status of the profession, particularly those working in the ECEC sectors (Osgood, 2010).

That said, other types of emotions work that borrow heavily from Noddings (2002) notions of “ethics of care,” such as the need to genuinely role model social and ethical virtues in a consistent demonstration of care to students, have not received the same level of dismissal regarding the importance of such work. For “male role models” in particular, their specific emotions work has been viewed as important for both schools in general and particularly for the boys within them (see Mills et al., 2008), with those practitioners engaging in such work positioned at times as “superhero figures” (Mallozzi & Campbell-Galman, 2014). Male staff members are expected to possess “ready-made” hegemonically masculine qualities (Mills et al., 2008), manifesting in assumptions that their professional identities of disciplinarians and leaders are natural (Brownhill, 2014; Malaby & Ramsey, 2011). Consequently, an “add men” approach (Mallozzi & Campbell-Galman, 2014, p. 264) in schools has been espoused based on assumptions that “standard male experience and aptitude” are useful in overcoming “female deficiencies” within the teaching and learning space. As has been explored, emotions work taking place within relational approaches to teaching seemingly has a gendered aspect, yet research investigating the explicit teaching of social and emotional skills, known as the “competence promotion approach” (Durlak et al., 2011) through an array of programs, schemes, and interventions, has largely remained “gender blind,” and it is to some of these schemes that we now turn our attention.

School-based social and emotional interventions

To encourage children’s social and emotional development, the environment, including schools, in which emotions work takes place needs to not only explicitly value supportive relationships (Noddings, 2005) but also embrace a “social and emotional curriculum” (Roffey, 2017) where the gendered concepts and skills such as emotionality, professional love, and care, as covered earlier, are central to its ethos, culture, and practices. A range of schemes that, although different in conceptualization, practice, and enactment, have commonality in their direct teaching of social and emotional skills to children, as a means of achieving more holistic, whole school approaches to pastoral support and well-being enhancement, are being implemented across schools worldwide (Reeves & Le Mare, 2017). One such form of intervention, widely known as social and emotional learning (SEL), focuses on the explicit teaching and development of inter- and intra-personal competencies, including motivation, empathy, social skills, emotional self-regulation, self-awareness, and responsible decision-making, embracing “soft pedagogical practices” often positioned as work natural for women (Odih, 2002, p. 91). There are now numerous SEL programs, whose specific content, foci, and “effectiveness”

have been widely researched, including, but by no means limited to, Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies (PATHS) (Greenberg & Kusché, 2002), Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL) (Humphrey et al., 2008), Incredible Years (Webster-Stratton, 2011), etc. Yet, although most programs do target the inter- and intra-personal skills outlined above, SEL is now serving as an “umbrella” term for “diverse approaches” in schools that intervene with the aim of enhancing these skills and competencies more broadly (Wigelsworth et al., 2023). Although there is no shortage of research focussing on the makeup, potential for transferability, related outcomes, and “effectiveness” of SEL (Wigelsworth et al., 2016), and the variables that influence these, “gender remains a notable omission” (Evans, 2017, p. 184), hence the need for further research in this area.

Another school-based intervention, popular for over 40 years in countries such as the United Kingdom as an effective strategy for supporting children with social, emotional, behavioral, or learning needs (Vincent, 2017), are “Nurture Groups.” Drawing largely on the theoretical position of “attachment” (Bowlby, 1969) and a child’s need for emotional bonds, proximity, comfort, safety, and support from caregivers, predominantly a role expected of mothers, Nurture Groups are most appropriate for small groups of children. They are based outside of the mainstream classroom but within the school, where key adults provide opportunities for emotional nourishment and social learning, within an environment where educational learning opportunities could also be accessed (Boxall, 2002). Again, although the detail of the Nurture Group may vary between schools, the key aim for all is to develop children’s social skills so they may be transferred to situations and environments outside of the group setting and thus allow for relationships with others to be initiated and maintained (Cooper & Whitebread, 2007). As is to be expected with an intervention of such long standing, there is now an established evidence base that demonstrates the positive effects of Nurture Groups on children’s confidence, interactions with peers, self-management of anger (Cooper & Tiknaz, 2005), social skills (Cunningham et al., 2019), ability to maintain friendships (Sanders, 2007), self-esteem (Reynolds et al., 2009), and generic social, emotional, and behavioral difficulties (Bennett, 2015). Once again, however, gender has largely evaded the attention of researchers interested in the way Nurture Groups are operationalized. Despite gender being one of the most “entrenched . . . tacit organising frameworks employed by educational institutions” (Evans, 2017, p. 186) central to curriculum delivery and pedagogic practice (Iverson & Murphy, 2007), there remains a dearth in the literature that explores its influence on the emotions work that takes place within schools. Although not the fundamental focus of the wider research study, this article reports on an aspect of it: how gendered narratives are often drawn upon by staff members working in schools to position their own roles and responsibilities when undertaking emotions work.

The research study

The wider research study was designed to explore how staff members made sense of, interpreted, and enacted the emotions work taking place within the primary schools in which they worked. Inevitably, perhaps, the range and type of such work and support varied between schools, with one of the main foci of this study concerned with the variables that influenced how it is positioned by staff and enacted with the children, an area lacking in investigation (Wigelsworth et al., 2023). Specifically, then, the study focused on the following research questions: How is emotions work enacted in primary schools? How is emotions work understood, interpreted, and valued by staff in primary schools? To what extent and how does emotions work vary between staff and schools?

Schools

Bearing in mind the emphasis on exploring difference, schools were sampled not only in terms of the type and extent of emotions work on offer but also as they presented a variation with regard to the number of pupils they had on roll, their size, and other demographic characteristics, such as free school meals eligibility, English as an additional language, pupil ethnicity, and school location.

Consequently, and embracing purposive sampling strategies, four schools were selected based on the researcher's knowledge of their investment in emotions work but also on the potential for difference in how this took place. Across the schools selected, all employed staff members whose roles specifically focused on this work and support, including learning mentors, behavior support workers, and other dedicated pastoral support workers. Additionally, all schools made use of their on-site Nurture Group provision, and utilized SEL across a variety of intervention waves, such as: wave 1, work focused on the whole school delivery of SEL within the classroom and via assemblies; wave 2, dedicated to small-group sessions designed to facilitate children's holistic social, emotional, and behavioral skills; and wave 3, focusing on one-to-one interventions with individuals deemed to be struggling with their social, emotional, and behavioral skills. This article's conceptual framework positions emotions work as including Nurture Group provision, SEL, as well as the roles, responsibilities, and work performed by staff members in terms of their own "emotional labor," "ethics of care," "educare," and "professional love," utilizing a range of positions offered by the likes of Hochschild (1983), Noddings (2002), Osgood (2005), and Page (2018). Consequently, at its heart, the aim of the project, as directed by the study's emphasis on emotions work across schools, was to explore the interpretation, use, and enactment of such work in educational environments where they may take place. The schools ranged in size from one small school with just over 100 pupils on roll, to a large, three-form entry school with over 600 pupils on roll. They also varied in terms of location, with one being in a rural, affluent area, another in a mixed catchment, and two in urban areas with high levels of social and economic disadvantage. All schools, apart from one, had higher than average levels of eligibility for free school meals.

Data collection

The data used within this article were drawn from two separate, but linked phases of the study that, in keeping with the focus on interpretation, perception, and enactment of emotions work, prioritized qualitative enquiry. As discussed next, both homogeneous and heterogeneous focus groups, where participants would be more likely to feel at ease (Krueger & Casey, 2014) as the component members of each were staff who frequently worked together, helped create "non-threatening environments" (Henninck, 2014) where data collection could take place. They were of particular use in gathering data on how emotions work was understood in a space where the focus group and themes explored focused explicitly on the perceived motivation for its use, its potential purpose, the school's and the individual's approach to it and enactment of it, and its impact. Semi-structured interviews, lasting between 30 and 45 minutes, also focused on these themes at an individual level, bearing in mind some of the criticisms levied at focus group research, that the findings are always co-constructed between those participating in the group (see Kook et al., 2019). Consequently, and with the aim of allowing individuals to "delve deeper" into their own personal insights, questions targeted the themes mentioned and focused on the individuals' work and roles in schools in response to emotions work.

Participants

The sampling strategies across both the focus groups and semi-structured individual interviews were nonrandom and purposive. There were 10 focus groups across the four sites, with 44 staff members in total. Focus groups 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) were organized in each of the four schools, whereas additional groups consisting of staff members across the whole school were also accrued out in the two larger schools. Again, embracing a nonrandom and purposive stratified approach to sampling during the individual interviews (see Emmel, 2012), staff members within schools were ordered into six distinct groups: management, inclusion co-ordinator, teacher, teaching assistant, pastoral staff, and welfare staff. An individual from each group was interviewed in each school; in total,

there were 24 semi-structured interviews. The justification for this sampling strategy, and the decision to gain views from these staff members, was grounded in Miles and Huberman's (1994) concept of allowing the research questions to guide sampling decisions, and so bearing in mind the need to understand the extent and ways in which emotions work may vary between staff, this sampling strategy helped to obtain the views from the broadest range of practitioners working in schools.

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval for the study was granted by the researcher's host higher education institution and the project adhered to all ethical guidelines outlined by the British Educational Research Association (2018). Each staff member participant received an information letter that detailed the following: purpose of the study, types of questions that would be included, approximate length of the focus group/interview, as well as contact details for the researcher. The information the letter contained was also verbally relayed to each participant before the research began. Informed consent forms were signed by all focus group members and individual interviewees. To enhance levels of confidentiality, each participant was allocated a pseudonym, and these, as well as the staff member's professional role, are used in the remainder of this article.

Analysis of data

All focus groups and individual interviews were transcribed and organized using ATLAS-ti software and at all times the analysis of data was guided by the study's aims, questions (Greene, 2007), and focus on how emotions work was understood, interpreted, and enacted. The qualitative data were thematically analyzed by an initial coding of data segments and then through synthesizing common initial codes into larger categories before a final repeating of the process and checking of the codes across the two data sets (Bergin, 2018). With data triangulation achieved, the focus groups and individual interviews acted as a large resource from which a range of themes were identified to help in understanding some of the issues captured by the study's aims and research questions. So, in response to the research questions focusing on how emotions work was enacted, understood, interpreted, and utilized, participants both individually and as part of the focus group discussions commonly discussed the value placed on this type of work, and how they performed it in keeping with their role. These initial codes formed part of larger categories, which have been reported elsewhere (see Wood, 2024), but when refining these larger categories, one common iteration within it was how male and female practitioners spoke differently about the value attributed to the work, how they enacted it, and how gender informed their interpretation of it. Consequently, one of the products of this analysis of data, focusing in particular on how staff couched their perceptions, interpretations, and enactment of emotions work in gendered narratives, provides the basis for the remainder of this article.

Research findings

When discussing the emotions work taking place within their schools, staff members often drew from gendered narratives to help position their own roles and responsibilities when undertaking this type of work. Specific gendered beliefs that emphasize women as nurturing and caregivers and men as disciplinarians were widely adopted by the staff, leading to an assumption that emotions work for women was effortless, common sense, and part of their "everyday identity" (Gee, 2008), yet for men this work was central to their role as an important male role model. Although there were occasions when this "role positioning" (Warin, 2018) was challenged and destabilized during the interviews, staff remained persistent in adopting a dualistic approach to gender to position their emotions work.

The emotions work allowed staff members to draw on their "funds of knowledge" (Gonzalez et al., 2005) as a parent to help frame their role. Being "*good at this social and emotional stuff, because I'm a good mum*" (Lilian – TA) was a common theme. Daisy, an

inclusion co-ordinator, felt that the emotions work she undertook required skills synonymous “with parenting such as being compassionate . . . looking for the positive, the good . . . and being proud of your children,” whereas Jane, a teacher, felt that “mothering is teaching.” These views support findings made by researchers such as Ailwood (2008) that illustrate how teaching has been widely associated with “mothering” and “nurturing.” It should be noted that there was disparity between the staff members in relation to the amount of importance they placed on their emotions work with the children, with non-teaching staff often making the case that such work is “just common sense” (Shirley – pastoral support), “not complicated” (Rebeka – learning mentor), and “effortless” (Eve – TA). Here is where some of the more gendered beliefs around work with young children being akin to “child-minding” and “baby-sitting” leads to a lack of an established professional identity (Gerstenblatt et al., 2014; Harwood & Tukonic, 2016) for early years workers, affecting the importance placed on such work, as is shown below:

Vera (Receptionist): I think this (emotions work) is just basic common sense. Is it not just common sense to help children with their social and emotional behaviors? It’s what I do with my own kids, as a mum, so you don’t need to do anything fancy to help the children with that.

The role of “educarer” (Osgood, 2005), largely, framed the perception of the emotions work they undertook as effortless “women’s work” (Osgood, 2012). Amber, a welfare assistant, drew on such narratives when stating, “You’re a nurse, you’re a carer, you’re a mum, you have to be . . . , but that’s ok, because if you see a child upset, stressed, crying, you would go and help them. It’s just the natural thing to do as a mum.” The “naturalness” (Osgood, 2005, p. 285) of the emotions work performed by women in schools was, however, identified as problematic by some, as is shown:

Bob (learning mentor): I don’t think the women have got the patience for some boys that have anger issues. I’ve seen women in the past who work with children with behavior issues and they struggle with them because they’ll try to mother them all the time, and sometimes they don’t need mothering, they just need strong boundaries, a father figure.

Here, Bob’s “policing” of gender (Butler, 1999) is symptomatic of the adoption of an “add men” approach that positions “standard male experience and aptitude” as necessary in overcoming “female deficiencies” in the delivery of primary-phase education (Mallozzi & Campbell-Galman, 2014, p. 264). In assuming the role of the disciplinarian, and in his own perceived projection of authority, Bob’s display of “hegemonic masculinity” (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005) illustrates an acceptance on his part of stereotypical tropes that position men as innately superior to their female counterparts in their ability to exercise discipline (Malaby & Ramsey, 2011). That said, there were occasions within the data set where the orthodoxy that positions men as the natural arbiters of discipline in schools was challenged:

Abigail (head teacher): In a school like this, with a head teacher like me, who doesn’t give as much value to things like (emotions work), as it doesn’t fit into my ethos and philosophy, it doesn’t work as well I lead by example, I don’t ask any member of staff to do anything that I wouldn’t do myself and I bollock kids daily I shout at them for effect.

Furthermore, a number of male staff members embraced more “sub-ordinate” notions of masculinity, by rejecting the stereotypical male behaviors (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005) advocated by Bob. Fred, a teacher, spoke about his emotions work being predominated by encouraging children “to listen

more; to take people's opinions and value them . . . to take on board what (others) have said and if they don't agree then say why, but to do it in a nice way; talking without using violence, without shouting." Stanley, a head teacher, maintained his main emotions work was about "always being a positive role model . . . an emotional literate person and (being able to) communicate effectively with the children . . . (knowing) how best to develop the child in terms of social, emotional aspects of life." Fred and Stanley's prioritization of communication, listening, and kindness demonstrates that a range of masculinities are apparent in the practice of men performing emotions work in schools, but although such demonstrations of "more progressive discourses . . . [of] sensitiv[ity] and caring" (Jones, 2007, p. 190) seemingly do inform the work of some male practitioners in schools, the majority of men interviewed in this study adhered to dualistic depictions of gender to help position their roles.

Although there were differences in how male staff members spoke about their enactment of emotions work, a common theme was the importance they placed on being a "positive male role model," with school leaders like Stanley, teachers such as Fred and Martin, and non-teaching staff like Bob (learning mentor) and Graham (TA), all positioning such work in these terms. The adoption of this "savior" figure for boys (Mallozzi & Campbell Galman, 2014), necessary in "the making of men" (Macan Ghail, 1994), placed male staff as a "prized commodity" (Jones, 2007) in school. Alex, a behavior support worker, encapsulates much of this positioning in the following extract:

Alex (behavior support worker): As a behavior support worker, I'm obviously assigned individuals to take out, mainly boys, and I address their anger problems and things like that or if they can't interact. The things I do, it's sort of trying to make them think that there is a consequence for their actions and . . . how they can react better to situations so, ultimately, I'm role modeling behaviors. I'm just being a male role model for the boys. When I'm on the yard, I'm again with boys who can't play in groups without getting angry or lashing out, so we take them on a small yard and play football with them and put them in a smaller group. It's important what I do as a role model, especially for those boys without that father figure in the home.

Alex's assumption of the possession of "ready-made" hegemonically masculine qualities, such as the disciplinary capacity to control "angry" boys through the outlet of sport (Mills et al., 2008) and the value placed on his adoption of a "male role model" and "father figure," illustrate more "role positioning" (Warin, 2018) within the emotions work performed by staff. Not only that, but the lack of value placed on the emotions work by the female staff members in this study, describing it as "common sense" (Shirley – pastoral support), "effortless" (Eve – TA), and "the natural thing to do as a mum" (Amber – welfare assistant), is yet further evidence of the "patriarchal dividend" (Connell, 1995) enjoyed by males working in schools. Above all else, though, the data explored in this section have revealed a propensity for staff to adopt a dualistic approach to gender in positioning their emotions work, be it maintaining the need to act "as a good mum" (Lilian – TA), a "father figure" (Alex – behavior support worker), a "male role model" (Graham – TA) or through the enactment of hegemonic notions of masculinity and femininity. Some of the consequences of this positioning and potential responses to it are discussed next.

Discussion: Gendering emotions work in schools

The interpretation and enactment of emotions work and its value

In keeping with an established stance of gender being one of the most implicit organizing frameworks in educational institutions (Evans, 2017), pertinent specifically to curriculum delivery and pedagogic practice (Iverson & Murphy, 2007), the findings made in this study contribute to knowledge in demonstrating how gender informs the emotions work taking place in schools. After gathering "the

experiences of men who do women's work" (Wingfield, 2009, p. 6), it was clear that although male staff members discussed and enacted their emotions work in differing ways, all felt they had an important role to play. In adopting traditionally hegemonic (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005) male positions, staff members such as Bob, by providing "*strong boundaries*" felt they took on multiple roles in their emotions work, including that of "disciplinarian" (Brownhill, 2014) and "superhero figure" (Mallozzi & Campbell-Galman, 2014) as part of their aim to be a male role model. Although these views, specifically, are by no means novel, the positions taken by Bob as a "*father figure*" and Alex as a "*role model for . . . boys*" were situated by both as important and needed aspects of the ECEC workforce, as their traditional masculine skillset overcame "female deficiencies" (Mallozzi & Campbell-Galman, 2014), in keeping with Børve's (2016) notion that men feel they bring aspects of teaching that are "missing" in schools. Conversely, but again in keeping with long-established research findings in similar areas (see Osgood, 2005, 2010), the emotions work was viewed by most female staff members as "*common sense*" (Shirley) and "*effortless*" (Eve), who grounded such views in maternalistic values (Ailwood, 2008) where staff related the skills associated with this type of work to those of a "*mum*" (Vera), "babysitter" (Gerstenblatt et al., 2014), and "child-minder" (Harwood & Tukonic, 2016). Historically, and throughout education, the positioning of women in their "most revered roles" as "that of mother and one-on-one carer" for children (Ailwood, 2008, p. 157) was also present in the data shared by female staff members in this study, and used as justification to trivialize the emotions work in which they engaged.

The perception of ECEC, and the emotions work within it, as intellectually unchallenging and "women's work" has been used as justification for the low status and remuneration of individuals working within this sector (Osgood, 2012). Although a more gender-balanced workforce could help in destabilizing this perception, school staff would also do well to adopt more gender flexible qualities (Warin, 2019) as part of the work they do. The findings made here revealed a tendency for staff members to take a dualistic approach to gender to locate their emotions work, with male staff members, as an example, relating their work to that of a "*positive male role model*" (Stanley) and/or "*father figure*" (Bob), and some female staff drawing upon their experiences "*as a mum*" (Amber and Vera). The heteronormative undertones within the data, captured in the consistent reference to maternal and paternal roles (Warin, 2014) and also in the valuing of heteronormative masculine behaviors such as that of disciplinarian, by staff members like Bob, is a demonstration of a somewhat passive acceptance of gender binary beliefs to inform emotions work. Bearing in mind the historic propensity for schools to also adopt gender dualistic positions, where stakeholders are seen as male or female and heterosexual (Connell, 2005; Garcia & Slesarsky-Poe, 2010), the data captured as part of this study illustrate its continuation within emotions work. Recently, advocates of gender flexible approaches to teaching and learning, such as Warin (2019), provide an outlet for an alternative to the positions showcased above, arguing not only that it is necessary to ground the support on offer in schools in all genders and sexualities but also that such gender flexible teaching can only be achieved and maintained if practitioners themselves become gender aware.

Disrupting the narrative: Variance in emotions work between schools and staff

It should be noted that there were examples of more gender flexible practices in the emotions work carried out by a range of staff members across the schools in this study. Head teacher Stanley and teacher Fred grounded this work firmly in the principles of the "ethic of care" (Noddings, 2002), and in doing so rejected some of the more hegemonic displays of masculinity prioritized by others. Their emotions work focused in the main on "*communicating effectively*," "*talking without shouting*," "*listening more* and being an "*emotional literate person*" — actions and behaviors pertinent to concepts such as "emotionality," "care," and "professional love" (Page, 2018), which are central to effective emotions work. Staff here, then, have shown that individual skillsets, characteristics, and practices need not be governed by gender. Furthermore, and in keeping with findings that female teachers and school staff do often engage in gender flexible practices (see Warin & Adriany, 2017), Abigail's adoption of the school's "disciplinarian" role, where she led "*by example*," in shouting at the children "*for effect*," demonstrates the use of behaviors and practices deemed hegemonically masculine. Although alternative approaches to emotions work have been encouraged,

Abigail, here, in her leadership and actions, is railing against the “steady progress of gender entrenchment” (Warin & Adriany, 2017, p. 384) in demonstrating that the role of disciplinarian is not monopolized by men, nor should it be used as justification for their inclusion in schools as “role models.” Although only fleeting, encouragement should be taken from the examples of gender-flexible practices of emotions work gathered in this study, as they illustrate how staff can loosen the shackles of the gendered behaviors expected of them (Brownhill & Oates, 2016).

Future directions: Placing gender at the heart of emotions work

Work to re-balance the gender of staff in schools is needed, not so that boys can have access to role models that are male, but as a means of moving toward a more gender equitable workforce. The consequences of such a workforce has potential for positive implications for children’s social and emotional development and related attitudes toward gender. The gender re-balancing of the workforce alone, however, is not enough. There also must be an acknowledgment, and action based upon it, that behaviors and practices seen as traditionally masculine or feminine are not bound by gender (Warin & Adriany, 2017). Seduction by gender dualism is more likely to be overcome if schools, and the staff within them, focus not on gender but on the characteristics, skills, behaviors, and actions required as the guiding principles to perform their duties accordingly. The products of gender-sensitive training (GST) hint at ways in which gender dualist practices may be disrupted, with its focus on providing space for discussion on gender-related topics, the product of which may allow school-based practitioners to engage in gender equal pedagogies (Josephidou, 2020) that “confront and disrupt gendered performances in children” (Warin & Adriany, 2017, p. 384). Although calls for gender reflexive practice for those working with young children have long been made (see Robinson & Jones-Diaz, 2006) and across countries (see Lumadi & Shongwe, 2010; Sohee, 2014), and despite its inclusion within initial teacher training programs and teachers’ continuing professional development (Warin, 2015), there is a preference to deliver GST through single sessions, above the development of gender flexible ideas over a period of time (Josephidou, 2020). Despite this being fertile ground, there remains a need to develop training and support, both pre- and in-service, to encourage gender-aware practice (Warin, 2019).

The emotions work taking place in schools occurs through a variety of means, with the practices and their impact changing over time. Indeed, there have long been, and continue to be, calls for such work to incorporate and target a variety of skills including, but not limited to, cultural intelligence (Vera, 2022), contestation (Lo, 2017), and the embrace of difference (Zembylas, 2018). So that children are best positioned to develop these skills, in addition to the expectation that the emotions work they receive generates students who are socially and emotionally capable, the school staff members working with them to master a range of pedagogical practices. An ability to prioritize gender flexible approaches to the practice of emotions work, I argue, is essential in this pursuit. The reclamation of care and emotions, not simply as a basis for emotions work, but as the core component of teacher professionalism is long overdue, but such change cannot solely lie within the remit of the practitioners themselves. Instead, principles of “emotionality,” “care,” and “professional love” (Page, 2018) need prioritization at institutional, inter-institutional, and governance level, as part of a “competent systems” approach to the re-conceptualization of teacher professionalism (see Urban et al., 2012). At the institutional level, at least, recent calls for schools to incorporate more “compassionate curriculum” (see Maratos et al., 2020) where, among other things, sensitivity to self and others, awareness of one’s own and others’ emotional states and triggers, and how conflict and contestation can be overcome in compassionate ways may provide an outlet for such re-conceptualizations, with gender flexible approaches at its heart.

Conclusion

Emotions work based on love and care were witnessed in the views and practices of the staff member participants gathered in this study. In so doing, they demonstrated how skills linked to “emotionality” are

being acknowledged and used as guiding principles in the evolution of teacher professionalism (Määttä & Uusiautti, 2013). However, although gendered narratives greatly informed the interpretation and enactment of emotions work, practitioners rarely engaged in critically reflective practice (Osgood, 2010) in their persistence in adopting dualistic approaches in the positioning of gender within such work. As some drew from “maternalistic” narratives and others insisted on the adoption of the position of “positive male role model,” there remained a reticence toward gender flexible approaches both within and between schools. In order for principles such as “emotionality,” “care,” and “professional love” to become valued in our educational establishments as the basis for emotions work, schools and the staff members within them need not only prioritize such principles but also apply them via consistent gender flexible practices. As this article demonstrates, work is still required in this area, yet hope remains that if practitioners can develop an ability to refrain from gender blindness in their emotions work, then the results may be beneficial not only to the children’s social and emotional outcomes but also to the development of the teaching profession itself.

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