



Research paper

Overcoming the odds: Exploring barriers and motivations for male trainee primary teachers



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Male trainee primary teachers experience barriers to the profession.
- Barriers faced by male trainee primary teachers can be overcome.
- Seeing teaching as a positive career choice increases resilience.

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ABSTRACT

The study investigated male primary school trainee teachers' barriers and motivations for their profession. Six male trainee primary school teachers were interviewed and data were analysed thematically. Three themes arose relating to potential barriers; physical contact; experiencing negative outsider perceptions; and working within a female orientated environment. Three themes demonstrated that barriers could be overcome if participants perceived the profession as a constructive career; had positive experiences of working in a supportive environment; and were seen as effective role models. Primary teacher training courses should not only aim to reduce barriers but also highlight the positive aspects that enhance motivation.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Background

Primary school teachers within the UK work with children aged four to eleven in either state run or independent schools. The main role involves teaching children core skills in literacy and numeracy as well as other subjects, and promoting social and emotional development (Department for Education, 2013). According to government statistics within the UK, the percentage of male primary school teachers in the academic school year of 2008/2009 was only 15% (Department for Education, 2012), whilst this figure has risen to 21% in the academic year 2014/2015, there remains a high gender imbalance within the profession (Department for Education, 2014). Alarming statistics have also revealed that 27.2%

of primary schools in England do not have a qualified male teacher within their body of staff (BBC Education, 2011). This gender imbalance is not unique to the UK, but is reflected in other countries across the globe (Riddell et al., 2005). For example in 2013, a number of countries, such as Bulgaria, Italy and the Ukraine, reported that 90–99% of their body of staff were females (The World Bank, 2013).

A number of studies have highlighted the importance of having male teachers within primary schools (McGrath & Sinclair, 2013; Riddell et al., 2005). McGrath and Sinclair (2013) interviewed parents and teachers about their perceptions of having male primary school teachers within primary school. Participants anticipated that male teachers within primary schools would enable the children to see that men could adopt a nurturing occupation and therefore be effective role models and father figures to students. Furthermore, participants felt male teachers might also be particularly important for boys in helping to improve their social skills and enable them to feel more comfortable to talk about sensitive subjects. There is also evidence to suggest that male teachers within the primary school classroom may be particularly beneficial in helping improve boys

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under achievement within schools and aid in the teaching of vocational skills that may be of particular interest to them (Riddell et al., 2005). However, Carrington and Skelton (2003) raise concerns about matching pupils and teachers based on same gender, arguing that it has little impact on achievement, although might have a more positive influence on other aspects of the school experience.

The presence of male teachers within the primary classroom appears to have at least some positive effects on the school population; nonetheless there remain relatively few working in these positions. Further investigation is therefore warranted to establish what the barriers are that prevent males from entering this profession, and what the motivators are that successful males in the profession adopt to overcome the challenges they face.

1.2. Motivations and barriers faced by male trainee primary school teachers

A number of barriers and motivators experienced by male trainee primary school teachers have already been identified in the previous literature (e.g. Cushman, 2005; Mulholland & Hansen, 2003; Stroud, Smith, Ealy, & Hurst, 2000). Research has shown that men who are making the decision to train as teachers within the primary sector are likely to gain support from their parents and close family; nonetheless they often need to weigh this up in the light of lack of understanding from peers who may criticise them for choosing an easy career option (Mulholland & Hansen, 2003). This lack of support experienced in the lives of male trainee teachers might link with the concept of 'identity bruising' highlighted by Foster and Newman (2005). These researchers argue that male trainee teachers have often received knockbacks from peers and colleagues, (as well as occasionally parents and partners) about their decisions to partake in this career. Concerns are raised to them about primary teaching being a low status profession. For example Cushman (2005) demonstrated that male trainee teachers had more demanding and time consuming jobs than their peers, however, they were left with the least amount of money. Furthermore, in terms of social status some males expressed that when teaching younger children, people perceive them as having lower intelligence than a teacher teaching older children. Carrington (2002) also suggests that primary teaching is often seen as an unattractive career choice for males due to the low pay and low status they receive and the assumption that to be successful they need to adopt a more nurturing role.

A further concern male trainee primary school teachers face is that they are very aware of being in the minority and working within a more feminine environment (Cushman, 2005). Male trainee teachers have commented that even before they start a job they have to negotiate a training course that is often more suited for their female colleagues and their learning styles (Mulholland & Hansen, 2003). The majority of the work on training courses focuses upon communication, planning and organisation skills, and learning that is often not classroom or practical based. Moreover, being in the minority could have some disadvantages as Cushman (2005) demonstrated in a study with male trainee teachers that some participants had reported that their female colleagues often joked about them getting a job based only on their gender and not their ability as a teacher. Although this could have been a potential barrier to a successful career Warwick, Warwick, and Hopper (2012) demonstrated that despite being in the minority on teacher training courses, males were often positive about their experiences and had not felt any disadvantage because of their gender. Furthermore, Lahelma (2000) showed that female teachers are supportive of their male colleagues emphasising how they can improve the atmosphere in staff rooms. Working within a minority

environment might actually be of benefit to some males and they could be more likely to assume a leadership role, be given differential treatment and be seen as having a stronger preference for their career than their female colleagues (Simpson, 2004).

Male teachers often feel under more scrutiny than their female colleagues in terms of physical interactions with children and have had their motives for pursuing the career questioned (Cushman, 2005). Carrington and Skelton (2003) found in interviews with male and female trainee teachers that many felt male teachers in particular were subject to more hostility and suspicion in their role. Hansen and Mulholland (2005) have reported that male teachers did not believe that they could have the same amount of physical interaction with the children as their female counterparts, for example hugging or holding hands, as more questions would be asked about their behaviour. An interesting point to emerge was that participants did feel that 'limitations on the expression and ways of demonstrating care toward their students would compromise their teaching' (pp. 126), yet some appeared more willing to sacrifice their quality of teaching in order to withhold their reputation and keep their job secure. Male teachers worked hard to come up with ways around the contact barriers, such as learning to listen to students' problems, becoming their safe haven, and to communicating effectively so that physical interaction was no longer required (Hansen & Mulholland, 2005).

These concerns may help to construct barriers for future potential male trainee teachers and ultimately prevent them from pursuing this career option. Nonetheless, male trainee teachers who are able to overcome these barriers are demonstrating remarkable resilience. They are able to maintain motivation for the profession despite experiencing risk. There are a number of motivators that can support successful career progression. Stroud et al. (2000) has demonstrated that intrinsic reasons were important in maintaining motivation for male trainee teachers, as men who partake in a career in primary education have a strong sense of purpose and commitment to what teaching requires from them. Many males entering teaching tend to have already had a career prior to the course and decided that route was not well suited to them; they substitute financial gain for the personal satisfaction they wish to achieve whilst being a primary school teacher.

Career progression could be another influencing factor in a man's choice to become a primary school teacher. Although statistics reveal that males are in the minority in the primary sector, they are however, more likely to become head teachers than their females colleagues. In 2014 there were 30,500 male and 178,000 female teachers; from the male cohort 15% were head teachers compared with only 7% for females. This shows the imbalance in terms of positions of power. Males, although more unlikely to join the profession, once they do are more likely to advance to a head teacher role (The Future Leaders Trust, 2016). This has been further acknowledged by Carrington and Skelton (2003) who wrote that one in four male teachers entering the profession will become a head teacher compared with only one in thirteen female teachers.

1.3. Resilience as a theoretical framework

The current study uses resilience theory as its theoretical frame. Although there is no universally accepted definition of resilience, for the purpose of the present study resilience will be defined as "a dynamic process encompassing positive adaption within the context of significant adversity" (Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000, p. 543). Resilience research is therefore built upon two fundamental judgements (Masten & Powell, 2003). Firstly, that the individual is demonstrating some kind of competence. For example in relation to male trainee teachers this could be conceptualised as engagement and progression on their course. Secondly, the

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