How do Pre-Service Male Primary Teachers Cope with Gender Related Challenges?

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Abstract: Male teachers are a minority in both primary teacher training courses and in primary schools around the world. Education research has identified numerous gender-related challenges faced by male primary teachers during their initial teacher training and later when teaching in schools. Despite noting that many males leave teacher training because of these challenges, researchers have spent much less time investigating strategies to assist men cope with them and persist in the profession. This paper aims to help address this gap through an investigation of the challenges pre-service male primary teachers face during their teacher training and identifying practical coping strategies. Findings revealed that the most difficult challenges faced by participants were those concerning physical contact and social isolation. Participants appeared to use a range of functional and dysfunctional coping strategies to deal with these challenges.

Keywords: male primary teachers; pre-service teachers; coping strategies

Introduction

Primary schools are a complex and dynamic workplace where teachers must navigate multiple interactions with students and colleagues on a daily basis. These interactions are problematised by the fact that staff in primary schools, both in Australia and overseas, are overwhelmingly female (Cruickshank et al., 2018; de Salis et al., 2019). There have been a range of factors posited for this gender imbalance. For example, there is a societal perception that primary teaching is "womens' work" (Moss-Racusin & Johnson, 2016, p. 380). Men who choose to enter the primary teaching profession can be confronted by suspicion regarding their motivations and intentions (Cruickshank, 2019). This suspicion can be an influential factor for male primary teachers when constructing their professional identities Smith (2008). Smith stated that work and identity are inseparably connected, with work giving people a sense of belonging. She found that it was highly challenging for men to "construct the identity of being a real man whilst doing women's work" (p. 4). This identity construction inevitably incorporates difficult decisions about resisting or conforming to gender stereotyping in relation to appropriate masculine behaviours (Sumsion, 2000). These men seemingly need to teach and nurture young children, while also displaying the attributes of a "real man" (Mills et al., 2008, p. 71). In choosing a career that can appear to challenge accepted views of masculinity, male primary teachers can be censured for not displaying "socially acceptable" (Francis & Skelton, 2001, p. 14) masculine behaviours and liable to

suspicion of homosexuality and paedophilia (Gosse, 2011; Smith, 2008). Compulsory police checks for all adults working with young children may have assuaged some of these concerns, yet they remain an issue for many male primary teachers.

Scrutiny and suspicion have made many men reluctant to work with young children, and has contributed to the low, and falling number of male primary teachers (Burn & Pratt-Adams, 2015; Foster & Newman, 2005). The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) reports that the percentage of Australian primary teachers who are male has dropped from 30.24% in 1983 to 18.11% in 2019 (ABS, 2020). This downward trend is also visible in numerous other developed nations such as England, New Zealand and the United States of America (de Salis et al., 2019; Cushman, 2008; Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2013). The falling number of male primary teachers is of concern for key stakeholders such as principals and parents (Cushman, 2008), many of whom believe that more men are required, both in the classroom and in the wider school environment. These stakeholders have cited a variety of reasons why more men are required in primary schools, such as a perceived ability to act as positive male role models and father figures (e.g., Pollitt & Oldfield, 2017) and to make school classrooms more representative of their local communities (e.g., de Salis et al., 2019). Interestingly, some of the reasons posited for greater male participation in primary schools are driven by the perception they are better suited to take on roles such as school disciplinarian (e.g., Palmer, 2020), manual labourer (e.g., Cruickshank et al., 2020), and sports coach (e.g., Burn & Pratt-Adams 2015).

Men who decide to pursue primary teaching may face gender related challenges during their teacher training. These challenges include males having more problems coping with the academic demands of the course (Mulholland & Hansen, 2003; Thornton, 1999), social isolation in female dominated classes (Cruickshank et al., 2015; Xu, 2019), uncertainty surrounding physical contact on school experiences (e.g., Cruickshank, 2019; Gosse, 2011), the potential for sexuality to be questioned (e.g., Jones, 2007; Mills et al., 2008), negative perceptions of male primary teachers in society/media (e.g., Petersen, 2014; Reid, 2019), uncertainty about expectations of male teachers as role models (e.g., Cruickshank et al., 2020; Mills et al., 2008), and discouragement from family (e.g., Erden et al., 2011; Foster & Newman, 2005) and friends (e.g., Mulholland & Hansen, 2003; Pollitt & Oldfield, 2017), often related to the status and salaries of teachers. Cushman (2005) noted that male trainee teachers often had more demanding and time-consuming jobs than their peers in other professions, but the lowest salaries.

Foster and Newman (2005) conducted focus groups with pre-service male primary teachers in the United Kingdom (N=48) and noted that these challenges and lack of support could contribute to what they termed "identity bruising" (p. 341). They also stated that pre-service male teachers often receive "knock backs" (p. 346) from colleagues, family, and friends in relation to their career choice. The identification of these challenges indicates that teacher training might offer gender specific challenges which could contribute to the higher proportion of male students dropping out of primary teacher training courses (Warwick et al., 2012). Increased attrition of these male students will also contribute to the low and falling numbers of males teaching in primary schools. An increased focus on the identification of coping strategies and access to specific support structures is a vital step in increasing the number of males training to be primary school teachers and improving retention rates at schools. Hence, this article reports on such a study, specifically through answering the following questions:

1.   What challenges do pre-service male primary teachers face during their teacher training?
2.   What coping strategies do they use to deal with these challenges?

Methods

Participants

The participants for this pilot study were pre-service male primary teachers (MPST) enrolled in a four-year Australian university Bachelor of Education (BEd) program and ranged in age from 20-46 (mean age = 28, SD = 0.98). The selective sampling process utilised in this study specifically targeted men as this was a priori male study, and these participants were a convenience sample. Of the 151 potential participants, 45 accessed the survey (11 1st year students, 12 2nd year students, 13 3rd year students, 9 4th year students) and responded to one or more items with 32 completing it. This response rate was deemed acceptable considering the pilot nature of this research (Bond & Fox, 2007).

Procedures

Participants were contacted through their university email address and invited to complete an anonymous online survey consisting of Likert scale items and open-ended items examining their perceptions of the gender related challenges they faced, and the coping strategies and supports they used to deal with them and persist in their teacher training.

Likert scale items (N=14) were formulated through a literature review on the topic of pre-service male primary school teachers with a specific focus on the gender related challenges they face. These items were divided into two stems based on prominent themes arising from the literature. These stems were the gender-related challenges male pre-service primary teachers may face during their professional experiences in schools (section A) and the gender-related challenges they may face during their university study (section B). Only challenges that were identified in multiple studies were included. All items were revised by the researcher and an expert panel consisting of a male primary teacher, a male primary school principal, a female English teacher, and three active researchers working at an Australian university Faculty of Education.

All challenges were presented as four-point Likert-scale survey items with the following descriptors '1 = Not a challenge', '2 = Slight challenge', '3 = Moderate challenge', and '4 = Critical challenge'. These descriptors were based on previous education-based surveys (e.g., Anderson & Pickeral, 2000). All items were constructed in a positive direction. Participants were required to rate the Likert-scale items from their perspective as a pre-service male primary teacher. Each challenge item was followed by additional questions regarding the coping strategies participants used to deal with the challenge. Participants were also able to add additional challenges and coping strategies at the end of the survey. This 14-item scale has been validated previously (Cruickshank et al., 2015) and yielded a high Cronbach's a value ($\alpha = 0.90$) for reliability.

Open ended questions gave participants the opportunity to expand on their Likert scale responses for each challenge item, include examples of their experiences with these challenges, and detail the coping strategies and supports they used to deal with them. All procedures were approved by the Tasmanian Social Science Human Research Ethics Committee (Approval number: H12257) and informed consent was provided by each participant before any data were collected.

The Brief COPE Scale

The brief COPE scale (Carver, 1997) was developed to assess situational and dispositional coping styles. The brief COPE was used in this study of male primary teachers

because it explicitly distinguishes between functional and dysfunctional coping strategies, has been used previously in educational contexts (e.g., Miyazaki et al., 2008) and has high reliability and validity (Cooper et al., 2008). In the brief COPE inventory (Table 1) Carver (1997) classified coping strategies as being either problem focused, or emotion focused. Problem focused coping is directed at the challenge itself; taking steps to remove it or reduce its impact if it cannot be avoided (Carver & Connor-Smith, 2010); for example, actively planning what steps to take to remove a challenge. Emotion focused coping is aimed at minimising the distress caused by the challenge; for example, making fun of the situation or reframing it to make it appear more positive. Problem and emotion focused coping strategies can also facilitate each other, for example, effective problem focused coping reduces a challenge and therefore also reduces the distress caused by the challenge. The interrelatedness of these strategies makes it more useful to think of them as complementary coping functions rather than as two distinct coping categories.

Within these coping functions it is also important to distinguish between functional, or engagement coping strategies and dysfunctional, or disengagement coping strategies. Carver and Connor-Smith (2010) argue that an awareness of this distinction can determine the success of a strategy. Functional coping includes problem focused coping and some forms of emotion focused coping. It involves dealing directly with the challenge and can include strategies such as support seeking, acceptance, and positive reframing. Dysfunctional coping is aimed at escaping the challenge or related emotions and is often emotion focused because it involves an attempt to escape feelings of distress. These strategies can include avoidance and denial. Disengagement coping is generally ineffective in decreasing distress over the long term, as it does not reduce the challenge's existence or its eventual impact (Najmi & Wegner, 2008). The classification of strategies in this study is primarily aimed at identifying successful, functional coping strategies that can be used by pre-service male primary teachers to help them cope with the gender related challenges they face during their teacher training, both at university and on practicums in schools. Functional problem and emotion-based strategies, along with dysfunctional coping strategies are detailed in Table 1.

Emotion focused strategies

Acceptance (accepting the reality that it has happened/learning to live with it)
Emotional support (getting emotional support/comfort and understanding)
Humour (making jokes about it/making fun of the situation)
Positive reframing (trying to see it in a different light, make it seem more positive/look for something good in it)
Religion (finding comfort in religious or spiritual beliefs/praying or meditating)

Problem focused strategies

Active coping (concentrating my efforts on doing something about the situation I'm in/taking action to try to make it better)
Instrumental support (getting help and advice from other people/trying to get advice or help from others about what to do)
Planning (trying to come up with a strategy about what to do/thinking hard about what steps to take)

Dysfunctional coping strategies

Behavioral disengagement (giving up trying to deal with it/the attempt to cope)
Denial (saying to myself "this isn't real"/refusing to believe that it has happened)
Self-distraction (turning to work or other activities to take my mind off things/doing something to think about it less)
Self-blame (criticizing myself/blaming myself for things that happened)
Substance use (using alcohol or other drugs to make myself feel better/to help me get through it)
Venting (saying things to let unpleasant feelings escape/expressing negative feelings)

Table 1. Contents of the Brief COPE (Cooper et al., 2008, p. 839).

Data Analysis

Descriptive survey data were tabulated using Microsoft Excel to calculate means, standard deviations and frequency counts for each of the challenge items (see Table 2). Qualitative data from the open-ended survey questions were initially coded line by line into key themes by the researcher in both an inductive and deductive manner (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) before being reviewed by the expert panel described above. The deductive analysis centred on the gendered related challenges identified in previous literature, whereas the inductive analysis allowed for new themes and connections to emerge from the survey data. The data were scanned for themes and relationships among initial categories. Data were then coded to relate key concepts and categories to each other, and then then compared to the categories contained in the brief COPE (Table 1) to analyse the functionality of coping strategies. These themes were modified and refined through the data analysis process (Dagkas et al., 2011) as the researcher and expert panel discussed and agreed on coding. All coding and analysis were done using the NVivo software package (Version 10).

Results

Descriptive data analysis showed that the participants perceived challenges concerning physical contact (X =2.29+/-0.99) as the most difficult challenges they faced during professional experience in schools, and social isolation (X =1.89±1.10) as the most difficult challenges they faced during their university study (Table 2). Uncertainty surrounding physical contact was clearly the most difficult challenge faced by participants, with 76% recognizing it as a challenge.

Section A: All items started with the stem "As a pre-service male primary school classroom teacher have you experienced any challenges during your professional experience in regards to:"				
Item	Item wording	n	Mean	SD	Recognised as challenge (%)
1	Uncertainty surrounding making physical contact with students	45	2.29	0.99	76
2	Difficulties with your colleague teachers in regards to your gender	43	1.30	0.60	23
3	Difficulties with other teachers at professional experience schools in regards to your	43	1.29	0.51	27
4	Difficulties with school parents in regards to your gender	43	1.28	0.55	23
5	Uncertainty about potential expectations of male teachers being role models	43	1.63	0.85	40

Section B: All items started with the stem "As a male Bachelor of Education (Primary) student have you experienced any gender related challenges during your university study in regards to:"				
Item	Item wording	n	Mean	SD	Recognised as challenge (%)
6	University work (e.g., lesson planning, academic writing, academic language)	39	1.33	0.62	26
7	Discouragement from your family about training to be a primary school teacher	38	1.34	0.81	18
8	Discouragement from your friends about training to be a primary school teacher	36	1.33	0.83	17
9	Discouragement from your former high school/college teachers about training to be a primary school teacher	37	1.22	0.63	14
10	Being discouraged by perceptions of male primary teachers in society/media	37	1.73	1.02	46
11	The potential for your motives and sexuality to be questioned	37	1.62	1.01	32
12	Feeling isolated in typically female dominated lectures and tutorials	37	1.89	1.10	49
13	Dealing with issues of masculinity as you approach working in a profession that is numerically dominated by women	37	1.43	0.93	22
14	Not being comfortable/not knowing who to ask for help in regards to gender related	36	1.47	0.88	28

Table 2. Survey Items and Descriptive Statistics.

Notes: n, number of participants who responded to item; recognised as challenge, percentage of participants who rated the item as a 'slight', 'moderate' or 'severe' challenge

Findings and Discussion

The following discussion will focus on the most difficult challenge participants faced in the school (uncertainty surrounding physical contact) and university (social isolation) contexts, as well as the coping strategies pre-service male primary teachers can use to cope with them. Analysis of qualitative data resulted in another challenge being added to the discussion. It appeared that many participants had conflated the challenges concerning role modelling, negative perceptions and the questioning of their motives and sexuality. The difficulties encapsulated in this conflated challenge was clearly a concern for participants in this study given the extensive written responses which indicated that they were aware of them as concerns and desired coping strategies to deal with them.

Physical Contact

Fear and uncertainty surrounding physical contact can be a substantial challenge for male primary teachers. Numerous studies (e.g., Cruickshank, 2016; Burn & Pratt-Adams, 2015) have noted that men are troubled by this issue and fearful of the potential career ending implications of being accused of making inappropriate physical contact. For pre-service male primary teachers, this challenge is often most evident during their practicum experiences in schools when they are interacting with young students:

> *I believe, as does my wife, who is also a primary school teacher, that there is a perception in society that it's ok that a female teacher hug or make contact to console a student, while a male teacher could not. I believe it's not fair that this perception exists. On my last professional experience, I worked with a student who was on the autism spectrum. Many times, I needed to place my hand on his back to get him to move along. It was always on my mind that maybe I wasn't allowed to do this. I overcame this situation by discussing it with my colleague teacher who was female, and she had no issues and was a real help for me as she said this is what she needed to do at times (Participant 8, 1ˢᵗ year MPST).*
> *I found the responsibility of changing a child with incontinence issues quite an uncomfortable experience, as I was not familiar with what was required/allowed. I sought advice from my colleague teacher (a female) who informed me what to do in that situation and it ceased to be an issue for me (Participant 14, 4ᵗʰ year MPST).*

These participants described their perception of a gendered double standard in terms of what was acceptable physical contact for male and female teachers to make with their students. These comments are consistent with previous research (e.g., Mulholland & Hansen, 2003; Xu, 2019) that noted pre-service male primary teacher believed they were under more scrutiny than their female colleagues when interacting with young children. These double standards have also been identified previously by practicing male primary teachers (e.g., Cruickshank, 2019; Cushman, 2005) and can make for challenging working conditions for men in schools. Participants indicated that they had been able to ask their colleague (supervising) teacher for advice in these situations. Despite these colleagues being female and potentially seeing this issue as less of a challenge, their advice and reassurance appear to have been of substantial assistance to participants in the absence of more proactive support from the school. Participants asking for and receiving support from their colleagues is a form of instrumental support, which is a functional problem focused coping strategy (Carver, 1997). This support appeared to be an important contributor to participants' abilities to cope with these double standards and the challenges caused by them.

The gendered double standards described previously can result in male teachers being very fearful of being accused of making inappropriate contact. This fear and resultant self-protection mindset have been noted by previous research (e.g., Bullough, 2015) on male primary teachers, and was also described by some participants in this study;

> *I ensure I am never alone with a student and do not touch students at all. I also speak with both female and male colleagues and observing their interaction with children (Participant 17, 4th year MPST).*
> *I take care to never be on my own with child and move into public places to talk to students. I also ask female colleague teachers for advice on this topic, as I have never had a male colleague teacher or even a male teacher in one of my prac schools (Participant 31, 3rd year MPST).*

These comments revealed that some participants avoid physical contact entirely, whereas others actively avoided situations that required them to make physical contact with, or even talk to, a student when no witnesses were present. These findings echoed previous statements on self-protection from practicing male primary teachers (e.g., Ashcraft & Sevier, 2006, Cruickshank, 2016). While moving to a public place to converse with students may appear to be a defensive strategy born of fear, it nevertheless can be considered active coping, which is a functional coping strategy (Carver, 1997). Participants avoided one on one situations with students because no witnesses meant no support or corroboration of their story in the event of an accusation. They also learnt vicariously through observing how their colleagues behaved in similar situations. These responses again highlight how important the support of colleagues, particularly females, was to participants' abilities to cope with fear and uncertainty surrounding physical contact.

Pre-service male primary teachers' fear and uncertainty surrounding physical contact can vary depending on the age of their students. Pollitt and Oldfield (2017) noted pre-service male primary teachers who believed that physical interaction decreased with student age. Participants in this study made similar observations;

> *I have only experienced a concern for my level of physical contact (e.g., comfort hugs, hand holding) when working with early childhood students, it has never arisen when working with upper primary as these older students generally want less comforting (Participant 2, 3rd year MPST).*
> *I am happy to give a kinder kid a hug if they are upset but I would not do the same with upper primary students, especially girls. I think that would be inappropriate (Participant 18, 2nd year MPST).*

These comments suggested that there was a perceived difference between making physical contact with an older upper primary student and a younger early childhood student. This difference might be because a comforting hug for a five-year-old is seen as more socially acceptable and innocent than a similar act with a more mature pre-teen (Cruickshank, 2020a). While these comments indicate that age is an important consideration for men working in primary schools, they appear to disagree on which age group is more problematic to work with. Younger students require more physical contact, yet this contact is seen as more acceptable. Conversely, older students require less physical contact, yet any contact could be seen as less acceptable and riskier for men fearful of accusations of inappropriate contact. This issue requires more detailed investigation than data from this study allows. What is consistent throughout responses in relation to physical contact is participants' fear. Participant comments were predominantly focused on protecting themselves from negative perceptions and legal issues rather than the value of physical contact for comforting students and building rapport. While this is disappointing, it is unsurprising given the high profile of "law and order" stories focused on male teachers, their sensationalised material and "the power of the media to negatively impact careers" (Reid, 2019, p. 48). Narratives pertaining to

how male primary teachers navigate encounters where physical contact may occur illustrate how fear and uncertainty underpin this challenge.

Social Isolation

Primary teaching has traditionally been a female dominated profession. The minority status of male primary teachers can result in them feeling a "profound sense of isolation" (Ashcraft & Sevier, 2006, p. 131) within numerically female-dominated schools. These feelings of isolation have also been noted in pre-service male primary teachers (Russo & Feder, 2001; Xu, 2019). Several participants in this study made similar comments about their university classes;

> *It takes time to realize how to behave within a group of females. I feel I need to sort of be withdrawn so that my female classmates do not feel too threatened by a man in 'their area' and will accept me (Participant 4, 4th year MPST).*
> *I make my presence as subtle as possible until contributions need to be made. This can be challenging as lecturers often asked me for the 'male perspective' on issues (Participant 30, 1st year MPST).*
> *As a male, I have really had to make the effort to be friendly and helpful, so I am accepted socially. All the females seem to be accepted automatically (Participant 33, 2nd year MPST).*

Participants indicated that they were very aware of their minority status and consequently acted in a way that they thought their female classmates would find acceptable, or perhaps, least objectionable. This selective introversion could be characterised as a functional active coping strategy (Carver, 1997) even though some participants felt compelled to adjust their behaviour to integrate at both a professional and personal level. Men being singled out in class to give their opinions on issues appeared to add to the difficulty of this situation. Pre-service male primary teachers dealing with the paradox of being simultaneously on centre stage, and on the periphery, has been noted by previous researchers (e.g., Foster & Newman, 2005; Thornton & Bricheno, 2006; Xu, 2019), and suggests an even more complex experience.

In response to their sense of isolation, participants made deliberate and focused efforts to be friendly and helpful when interacting with their classmates. While the appropriateness of such an approach is hardly confined to men, Pollitt and Oldfield (2017) similarly noted that being sociable and comfortable interacting with female classmates could assist men coping with social isolation. Their research suggests men could benefit from exhibiting a more outgoing personality. This finding differs from the comments some participants in this study who instead choose to withdraw socially in a manner destined to increase their sense of isolation. This lack of agreement again highlights the challenges pre-service male primary teachers face, and the difficulties they encounter as they try to develop effective coping strategies.

Pre-service male primary teachers experiencing social isolation in their university classes can consider increasing their interaction with the other men in their course. This approach has been noted by previous research (e.g., Mulholland & Hansen, 2003) and was mentioned by participants in this study;

> *I form friendships with other students (particularly male students) and just getting on with things (Participant 1, 2nd year MPST).*
> *I don't use any strategies to overcome this [social isolation] challenge; I just do units online instead and talk to other male teachers when I can (Participant 5, 1st year MPST).*

Previous research (e.g., Thornton & Bricheno, 2006) has noted pre-service male primary teachers congregating together to reduce their social isolation. This strategy was also employed by many of the participants in this study. While these coping strategies could be classified as functional strategies such as acceptance and active coping (Carver, 1997), in separating themselves from most of their classmates, at some level it could be equally characterised as the dysfunctional coping strategy (Carver, 1997) of avoidance. Although some of the participants studied online, they were required to complete four professional experiences in schools as a part of their degree. In the highly feminised environment of Australian primary schools, they would then have been compelled to engage with female staff, students and parents, both on practicum and later after gaining a teacher position after graduation. Therefore, they are better advised to adopt coping strategies that are less focused on avoidance and more focused on building positive professional relationships with all of their colleagues.

In addition to their isolation in university classes, numerous participants commented on their perceived isolation during their placements in schools;

> In a staff of predominantly females talking about female interests there was a bit of discomfort having a male in the staff room. I had an informal chat with the only other male teacher as to the issues, complications and perceptions of other staff members. I wish I knew more experienced male teachers I could talk to about stuff like this (Participant 10, 2nd year MPST).
> The staffroom teacher conversations can be quite feminine and isolating for a male to engage in. I used to go and have a chat to the groundsman as he was the only other male at school. The female principal was supportive as well (Participant 29, 1st year MPST).

Teachers' interests and preferred conversation topics are likely to vary as much within genders as across genders, yet these participant responses align with the findings of previous research on practicing male primary teachers (e.g., Ashcraft & Sevier, 2006; Cruickshank, 2020b; Burns & Pratt-Adams, 2015) in relation to staffroom conversation topics. Conversations focused on 'female interests' were hardly surprising considering most staff members were female, yet this situation did appear to contribute to participants' perceptions of social isolation. Participants indicated they were able to cope with social isolation on their school experiences through the support of male teachers and school leaders. Participants asking for and receiving support from school leaders and other men is a form of instrumental support. Instrumental support is a functional problem focused coping strategy (Carver, 1997) and has been used by practicing male primary teachers (Cruickshank, 2016). This strategy could also be perceived as a self-isolating behaviour that only exacerbates their situation. This interpretation aligns with Smith's (2008) finding that male primary teachers both exclude themselves from social situations and feel excluded from them. These behaviours could be seen as self-distraction. Carver (1997) defines self-distraction as turning to work or other activities to reduce the focus on another issue. These dysfunctional coping strategies might remove male primary teachers from uncomfortable staffroom interactions but would also deny them the opportunity to build relationships with their colleagues that would reduce this discomfort. Despite the potential negatives of these strategies, they did appear to help some participants cope with the social isolation they experienced in their schools.

Negative Media/Societal Perceptions

A societal perception that primary teaching is a female profession continues to influence the number of men who choose to enter and remain in the profession. Studies such as Moosa and Bhana (2020) have identified the media as being "an influential factor in fuelling scepticism about men who aspire to teach young children" (p. 5). Previous research (e.g., Gosse, 2011; Smith, 2008) has also suggested that male primary teachers must deal with societal suspicions of being gay because they have chosen to work in a profession deemed to be a woman's domain, and/or being paedophiles because of their choice to work with children. Although no participants made explicit references to suspicions of homosexuality or paedophilia, their answers suggested they were aware of these perceptions and the resultant negative media portrayals that have been noted by pre-service male primary teachers previously (e.g., Pollitt & Oldfield, 2017, Thornton & Bricheno, 2008). Participants indicated that they used several strategies to avoid being viewed in this way;

> *I am very aware of the negative perceptions in the media about men working with young children. I work hard to be noticed as a positive role model who will have a positive influence on students. I volunteer with several organizations, and always encourage my classmates and try to be a good team member who sets and maintains high standards in my work (Participant 3, 4th year MPST).*
> *Being whole-heartedly committed to completing my studies in an enthusiastic manner and being a positive male role model. I think this is the best way to convince others that I am suited to primary teaching (Participant 17, 1st year MPST).*
> *You just have to show yourself to be macho or blokey just to people think you're not a creep (Participant 29, 3rd year MPST).*

All teaching staff should aim to be positive role models for their students (Warin, 2019). However, these comments revealed that participants were actively engaged in creating a teacher identity that was consistent with their perception of the 'right kind' of man to be a primary teacher. Pre-service male teachers have previously stated that this kind of man must exhibit the "right mix of characteristics" (Jones, 2007, p. 191). Jones noted these characteristics are those traditionally associated with men, such being firm but fair disciplinarians; good at and interested in sports; and have a good sense of humour. These characteristics have also been identified by male and female pre-service teachers more recently (de Salis et al., 2019). Fear of being viewed negatively, and therefore dangerous to children, appeared to have influenced some participants in this study to exhibit traditional masculine behaviour. While some researchers (e.g., Cushman, 2008; Warin, 2019) have advocated for male role models who can display a range of different masculinities, the breadth of opinion in these and other studies highlight the assistance that male teachers require in developing strategies to approach this challenge, as many are fearful of being perceived as displaying the wrong kind of masculinity.

Like the isolation challenge above, participants also referred to their professional experience placements in schools when describing their coping strategies. These strategies again focused on developing positive relationships with relevant stakeholders;

> *I guess I just try to do a good job and build positive relationships with my students and their parents etc. If I do a good job then, in time I guess this will improve these perceptions within my school community which is a positive start (Participant 9, 3rd year MPST).*
> *I just focus on building relationship with parents, so they know me and hopefully see me differently to those negative perceptions of male primary teachers more generally (Participant 16, 2nd year MPST).*

> *I talked to an experienced teacher who is a personal friend. He just told me to do my best and I would become accepted in my school and these negative media perceptions would be less of an issue (Participant 20, 1st year MPST).*

As participants were unable to change societal perceptions of male primary teachers themselves, it appeared that the strategy many had adopted was to try to improve these perceptions within their own schools. The importance of male primary teachers gaining acceptance from the parents of their students has been noted by previous research on male primary teachers (e.g., Cruickshank, 2016; Mills et al., 2008; Thornton & Bricheno, 2008), and can be considered active coping, which is a functional coping strategy (Carver, 1997). These comments indicated that participants in this study deliberately sought to build rapport with parents, and that they believed that this would make their job easier long term. It appeared that participants believed that the development of this trust and rapport would make them less vulnerable to false accusations of inappropriate behaviour and ensure that their school community viewed them as different to the high-profile paedophiles seen in the media. While building rapport is important for all teachers, previous research (e.g., Petersen, 2014) has suggested than men are more likely to be perceived negatively for working with young children. These findings suggest that male teachers in particular, should be encouraged to build trust and rapport within their school communities as quickly as possible.

Conclusion

Participants in this study acknowledged the gender related challenges they faced during their teacher training and detailed the coping strategies they used to deal with them. Despite the self-reported abilities of participants to cope with these challenges, some of the strategies they used could be characterised as dysfunctional, as they appear to be more about avoiding challenges than dealing with them. Research (e.g., Najmi & Wegner, 2008) has suggested this dysfunctional approach is unlikely to be a successful long-term strategy as it does not reduce the existence or eventual impact of challenges. Future research could consider investigating how pre-service male primary teachers can be encouraged to utilise more functional coping strategies.

Caution is necessary when considering these findings given that this pilot study had a small sample of selected participants from one Australian university. Increasing the number and variety of participants, as well as the addition of follow up interviews should be considered by future researchers. This approach could increase the diversity and depth of perceptions of the gender related challenges faced by pre-service male primary teachers, and the coping strategies they can use to deal with them. Although all teachers could be helped by a more positive depiction in the media (MacDonald & Cruickshank, 2017), schools and universities might need to take on a more proactive role in helping men deal with the gender related challenges they face in their profession. Previous research on pre-service male primary teachers (e.g., Moyles & Cavendish, 2001) has noted they are less likely than their female colleagues to ask for help. Proactive university strategies such as male only support groups have been effective previously (e.g., Warwick et al., 2012) and could be considered by other teacher training institutions struggling with the retention of male students.

Schools and universities might need to be more proactive in responding to the particular demands of male primary school teachers. Participants indicated that engaging in informal question and answer sessions with experienced male primary school teachers would be their preferred coping strategy for dealing with gender related challenges. This finding aligns with previous research (e.g., Thornton & Bricheno, 2006; Warwick et al., 2012). However, as the gender imbalance in schools limits these opportunities, participants engaged

with experienced female colleagues as well as using other coping strategies and supports to help them deal with the gender related challenges they face in their teacher training. If schools and universities do not have experienced male staff that can mentor younger male teachers, they might need proactively facilitate this occurrence. This could involve male teachers attending conferences and building local male teacher support networks, and the employment of retired male primary teachers to act as mentors. If more experienced male teachers can be retained within the profession to act as mentors, younger men might be able to develop successful coping strategies for the gender related challenges they face, and consequently persist in the profession. In time they could act as mentors for the next wave of new male teachers and contribute to the increased retention of men in primary schools.

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